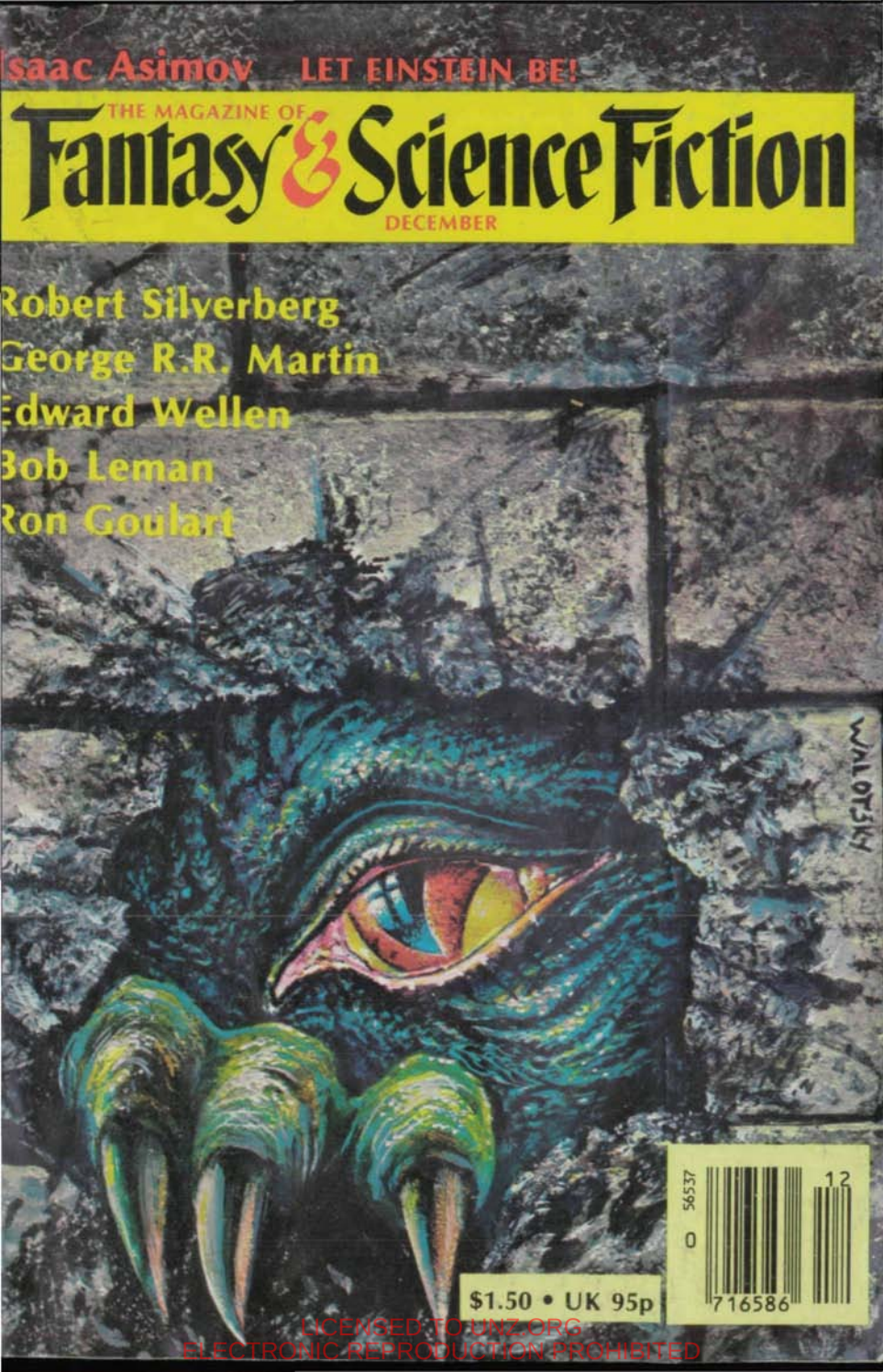

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The Wine of Violence

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Bob Leman (whose story "Window," May 1980, received a Nebula award nomination), returns with a rip-snorting tale about a scheme for murder and some powerful Indian medicine and featuring some of the most malevolent creatures we've ever come across.

The Tehama

BY

BOB LEMAN

In an old house, late one night, a quantity of brick was suddenly pushed out of a cellar wall from behind, and the entrance of a tunnel was exposed. Two creatures hopped from the tunnel into the room. They were human in form, in a general way, but their legs as well as their arms terminated in hands with heavy claws, and there was something strongly canine about the heads and faces. Their doggish mouths were full of enormous yellow teeth, as pointed and sharp as needles. They were absolutely hairless, and covered with yellow mud. Here and there on the squat bodies mudless patches exposed skin as white as chalk.

They could speak. One of them said, "Soon food."

"Long time no food," said the other. They spoke in whines and growls and snuffles.

"How long time?" said the first. They stared at each other with dull curiosity.

"Long time," said the other. "*Long* time! *Long* time!" They did not possess very many words. He snapped ferocious teeth at the questioner to bring home his point.

The first snuffled agreement. In a dim, vague way, he could feel that it had been a very long time indeed. "Hungry," he said.

They had always been hungry, of course; hunger was their natural state, a perpetual thing. They hungered for flesh, preferably in an advanced state of natural decomposition, but also acceptable bloody and alive. They had been hungry when the medicine man's spell shut off their consciousness (such as it was), and the hunger continued — even though unfelt — during all the centuries they had lain encysted deep in the yellow clay. When consciousness re-

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turned, it was first as awareness of hunger.

"Find food," the first one said. They looked about them. They could see very well in the dark. There was an open door on the other side of the room. They went to it and tried to pass through the doorway together. Each individual was almost as wide as the opening, and they became involved in a clumsy slapstick tussle in the doorway, chewing and clawing each other with great ferocity, leaving splotches of yellow blood on the floor.

Once they were through, however, the altercation was instantly forgotten, and they went snuffling down the passageway with their talons clicking on the stone floor. It was a very large house, and the cellars were extensive. The passage turned and twisted, and brought them at last to the foot of an iron spiral staircase, which they climbed, after some confusion and bloodletting over their order of precedence in the necessary single file. At the top of the staircase was a landing with a door. They pushed and pulled at the door, and growled at it, and bit each other out of frustration. At last one of them struck it a vindictive blow; it flew open, its lock shattered.

They had reached the kitchen. There was food here, a great deal of it, but they had no way of knowing. It was food that lay cold and odorless behind refrigerator doors, or was sealed in cans, or was boxed dry stuff that would no more have seemed food to them than the door they had just smashed. They stared about with dull wonder at the gleam of chrome and the shine of enamel, at a hundred incomprehensible artifacts.

One of them gave a noisy sniff; the other became instantly alert and joined him in testing the air. The first said, "Food." They moved off in the direction of the smell's source. They went through a dining room and down a hallway and into the main living room of the house, where there was indeed food.

It was in the form of two men and a German shepherd dog. The dog was large and fierce, and he had been aware of the intruders long before they became aware of him. Because he was a highly intelligent animal, and supremely well trained, he had obeyed a command to stand fast and be silent; but he quivered like a taut wire under the tension of restraining himself, and his chest trembled with a deep, subvocal growl of the utmost malignity. He was crouching to spring, a powerful engine of destruction caught up in a frenzy of rage and loathing.

When the creatures entered the room, he attacked. A voice shouted, *"Stay!"* but the dog was beyond control; he was suddenly a blur of movement, a flashing passage of great savage teeth launched at the foremost of the intruders.

The creature did not shift its position, nor did it appear to move hastily when it swung its stubby arm; but the

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blow was timed with exquisite precision, and in it was enormous strength. The dog's rib cage was instantly shattered and splintered, and his heart pulped; he was dead in midair. Before he could drop to the floor, the second creature hooked him at the neck with its talons and pulled. The talons of the first were sunk deep in the body, and it resisted the pull. The head separated from the body; there was a sudden, copious spout of blood.

With importunate, single-minded greed they tore the dog to pieces and began to feed noisily, cramming huge chunks into their terrible mouths, devouring flesh, bones, hide, and offal indiscriminately, crunching and snuffling and slobbering. In less than a minute nothing of the dog remained but his blood soaking into the carpet and a terrible stench in the air.

The two men were standing at the other end of the room. "Oh, my God," one of them said. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God." Both of them were pale and trembling. They were slender men dressed in youthful clothing of gaudy color and design, but they were twenty years older than their clothing indicated. One of them was quite gray; the other had dyed his hair yellow. The hair of both was arranged with extreme care.

"Oh, my carpet, my carpet!" the gray one cried. "Dennis, look at my carpet!"

"Your *carpet?* — your carpet! Look at those things! How are we going to get out of here? Oh, my God, they see us! Oh, my God!"

The dog had been no more than an appetizer for the pair. The two men promised a filling, if not particularly tasty, meal. Snuffling, the creatures moved toward them.

"Gordon, do something!" Dennis cried. "For God's sake, do something!" His voice rose to a thin, terrified piping. "Do something, do something." He had wet his trousers.

"Oh, Jesus," Gordon said. "Yeah. Do something. I've got to — I've got to—"

"The *spell*, Gordon! The spell!"

"Yeah, the spell. I've got to — the *spell!*"

Gordon seemed to make a partial escape from his trance of terror. He snatched up two painted gourds that lay on the table. They were rattles. He began to shake them in an odd rhythm and to chant in a minor key.

The creatures halted their advance. Their snuffling ceased. They stood without motion. Gordon continued to shake his rattles, and his chanting became louder and more assured. The creatures shivered suddenly and became as rigid as stone. Then, in a ponderous and almost stately manner, they tipped and crashed stiffly to the floor, where they lay like toppled idols.

The men collapsed into chairs and sat trembling for a time. At length Gordon said, "Well, it works. I raised them and I put them down." He

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thought about it for a moment. "It works. I did it. It really works." He began to laugh. Dennis joined him, tentatively at first, and then with equal abandon. They were caught up in an hysteria of relief from their terror, and it was some time before they could gain control of themselves. Then, as their giggles gradually subsided, they began to stare with mounting horror at the recumbent monsters. At last Dennis said, "We almost got killed."

"And eaten," Gordon said. "Poor old Rex."

"Oh, Jesus," Dennis said. Both looked sick.

"The thing is," Gordon said, "is what do we do now? What do we do with these things?"

"You should have thought about that beforehand. 'Let's try it, let's try it,' you said. Now you've got 'em. My God, look at 'em."

They looked at the comatose creatures with fear and revulsion. Gordon rose and edged toward them, timid and tentative, ready to take flight if they showed signs of life. They remained totally inert, their eyes closed, the feral muzzles slackly agape, revealing bits of dog clinging to the frightful teeth. Gordon reached out with a finger and, after a couple of hesitant withdrawals, poked at one of them. It had no effect.

"They're out, all right," he said. "Back in suspended animation, or whatever it is. The spell works okay." He thought about that for a moment. "*Both* spells work. Everything's going according to the plan. Right?"

Dennis had cautiously come up to join him. "'According to the plan'" he said with scorn. "'According to the plan.' What's the matter with you? The plan was to invoke something to kill your aunt for you. How the hell are you going to get these — *things* to do that — to do *anything?*"

"I can control them. You saw that," Gordon said defensively.

"Control?" Dennis said. "You can raise them up and put them back to sleep, that's all. In between you've got about as much control as Rex had."

Gordon winced. "Well, yeah. I suppose that's right. We'll have to figure something out. But what do we do right now? These things can't stay here."

"We'll have to hide them," Dennis said. "They came up from the basement. They must have been buried someplace down there. We'll find their hole and put them back."

"And how do you suppose we'll do that? Look at the size of them. And they're as hard as a piece of wood. They must weigh three hundred pounds apiece. There's no way in the world we could carry them down to the basement — or anywhere."

"All *right*. Leave them there, then. Use them for decoration. Just the thing to complete the decor. Hose off the mud and they'll be exactly the right color." The room was, in fact, painted and furnished in subtle gradations of near-white.

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"Oh, shut up, Dennis," Gordon said. "I guess there's no way out of it. I'll have to call Pokatewa for help."

"It's not according to the plan at all. He knows too much already. We're going to get caught. I know we're going to get caught."

"We haven't broken any laws yet. And he already knows we're up to something. Anyhow, who the hell else can help?" He went to the telephone and dialed. After a time he said, "No answer."

As he hung up, the doorbell rang. The two stared at each other in panic. "What —?" Gordon said. "Who —?"

"Oh, my God, they've got us!" Dennis said.

"The window," said Gordon. "You can see the front door from the bay window. See who it is."

Dennis peered through the curtain and turned with relief on his face. "It's him," he said. "The Indian. Smithers."

"Native American," Gordon corrected automatically. "And don't use his paleface name. Call him Pokatewa."

"Whatever," Dennis said. He went out of the room, and there was the sound of the opening and closing of a door. He re-entered with a companion, a thickset man dressed in what is sometimes called "Full Cleveland" — maroon polyester trousers, a green blazer of the same material, a black shirt with no tie, and white patent leather shoes and belt. He raised his hand to shoulder height, palm outward, and without visible irony said, "How."

"Smithers!" Gordon said. "I mean Pokatewa! Am I glad to see you! I was just trying to call."

"Well, well, well," Smithers said. "What have we here?" His eyes had widened for a moment at the sight of the monsters, but he showed no other sign of alarm or amazement. "So these are what you got."

"They're what I got," Gordon said, "and they're not what I wanted. What on earth am I going to do with them? What are they, anyhow? They killed my dog."

"Ate him," Dennis said.

Smithers was examining the teeth and talons. "Why, I think they're what's called Ne-dake-ne-kevis," he said. "At least they're kind of like what the old man described. Of course he had only tradition for the description. Look at the size of 'em. They look mean."

Gordon shuddered. "Oh, they are, they are. But *what* are they?"

"The name means 'Eaters of those whose ghosts have departed,'" Smithers said. "What you have here is your basic ghoul. My people never did think very well of them. Where'd they come from?"

"They came up from the basement."

"Yeah, that figures. I've heard that this area through here was put off-limits by the medicine men in the olden times. They thought the white men were crazy to live around here. When you woke 'em, they must have started burrowing and came out in your cellar."

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"Well, they can't stay here," Gordon said. "How do we get rid of them?"

"Gordon," Smithers said, "I think we'd better have a little talk. You want to fix me a drink?"

The sun was rising when Smithers left the house. He descended the broad stone stairway to his car, a huge, unabashed gas-guzzler, and drove off down the long driveway. The land on both sides of the driveway belonged to real estate speculators, now; all that remained of the old Alfred Evans estate was the house Smithers had just left, with two acres of land and a right-of-way from the highway.

The house was a very large and very ugly one, built at the turn of the century by a rich man to flaunt his wealth. The Evans brothers, Alfred and Frank, had been coal barons, rapacious cold men who pulled themselves out of the pit and into opulence in the space of a decade, leaving a debris of broken businesses and broken men at the stages of their climb, and making their name a synonym for merciless greed. They lived austere bachelor lives in the grimy house where they had been born until long after they became millionaires, when at last both built ostentatious and very similar mansions on adjoining large estates located at a decent remove from the mines. Alfred never married, but Frank had a son, and then a grandson and granddaughter, and, finally, a great-grandson. This was Gordon, who was clearly destined to be without issue and the last of the line. Gordon had inherited the Alfred Evans place when he came of age and had supported himself ever since by selling off the land, piece by piece, until only the house was left.

The other house, the Frank Evans place, was now the property of Gordon's aunt, Helena Slade, old Frank's granddaughter. Smithers parked in front of it and climbed a set of steps very like those he had just descended. He rang the bell. After a long wait, the door opened slightly. Smithers said, briskly, "Morning, Signe. Helena in?"

"You crazy?" the old woman said. "You know what time it is? Helena's in bed. So was I, until you come ringin'. Come back at a decent hour. This is no time to be ringin' people's doorbells."

A distant voice called out, "What is it, Signe?"

"It's Eddie Smithers," the old woman shouted. "Wants to come in. Don't know what time it is, I guess."

"Let him in, Signe," the voice said. "Give him some coffee. I'll be down in a little while."

"All right," the old woman said, and, to Smithers, "Well, come in, Eddie. She's as crazy as you are."

She left him in a morning room, to which she at length brought coffee. He had drunk two cups by the time Helena Slade entered, a trim, white-haired woman wearing twin sweaters and a

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tweed skirt. She said, "Good morning, Eddie. I'm sure Signe has already called your attention to the time."

"Morning, Helena. Yes, she did. I thought what I have couldn't wait."

"Yes. Well, tell me." She sat and took coffee.

"Gordon's planning to kill you," Smithers said.

The hand raising the cup may have paused for a fraction of a second; otherwise she did not visibly react. She drank and then said, in an ordinary voice, "I wondered when he'd think of it. It's that damned idiotic will."

"He's just about at the end of his rope," Smithers said. "He hasn't got anything left to sell, except his house."

"You ought to know, Eddie. You were broker for every acre he sold, weren't you?"

"I'm a businessman," Smithers said. "He wanted to sell, there were buyers, somebody was going to get the commissions. Anyhow, he's broke, now. And of course when you die he gets the money you hold as trustee for him. I think you made a big mistake, there, Helena. You've refused to let him have a nickel — and it was wholly at your discretion how much of the money he was to have as income — so that now he's totally certain that your death is the only way he'll get his hands on the money. And it *is* his, after all. He's serious about this, dead serious. Even if you give him the money now, I'm not sure you'll be safe. He really hates you. You turned him down once too often when he asked for some of his money. But you'd better hand it over right away. Today, say."

"But he could never get away with it. If he — if something happens to me, he's the only one with a motive. And now you know what he's planning."

"If he's caught after he does it, it won't help you a bit, will it? Give him his money."

"Eddie," she said, "I can't."

"Why not?"

"There isn't any."

"Ah," Smithers said. "I see. Slade cleaned you out entirely, then." Helena had married in her youth a charming, remorseless confidence man who was known to have enriched himself greatly out of the Evans fortune before he deserted Helena and fled to the Riviera. "And you've been using Gordon's money ever since. But how the hell could you have spent it all? There must have been anyhow a million?"

"Closer to two. Slade got some, and I went into some unfortunate speculations in trying to make up deficits. It's all gone, Eddie, every cent of it, and nothing to show for it. I'll go to prison, I suppose. Or Gordon will kill me. I knew it would come eventually."

"Helena," Smithers said, "do you think I'm going to let anything like that happen to you? We've been friends for forty years and, for a while there, considerably more than just friends. Don't worry. I'll get you out of it."

"I don't see how," she said. "If Gordon finds out the money's gone, he'll

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prosecute, and if he doesn't find out, he'll kill me to end the trust. And he's stubborn. I don't think anything will make him drop it. Not ever in his life."

"Right!" Smithers said heartily.

She looked at him. "Oh," she said. "Yes. Yes, that would do it, if Gordon died, wouldn't it? But how could we — how would you do that?"

"Why, I think I can turn his own little scheme around so he'll be the victim, not you. I'm going to give it a shot, anyhow. It'll be tricky. He's fooling around with things he doesn't understand at all. I don't either, to tell the truth. But I know a lot more than he does."

"What is it, Eddie? What is it that he's doing?"

"Some old Indian stuff," Smithers said. "Witchcraft, I guess you'd say, except that I never heard the word used for the Indian version. He was trying to call up a supernatural creature to kill you."

Helena laughed. "No, really."

"Oh, I'm perfectly serious. The fact is, he's already done it. Called up his creature, that is. He didn't get quite what he was after, of course."

She stopped laughing. "You *are* serious."

"I am indeed. It's my doing, really."

"What does that mean?"

"Helena, I'm a Sangimee Indian. Everybody know that, but nobody ever stops to think about it, because all they see is a one-hundred-percent-go-getter realtor and City Councilman and Rotarian. Sometimes I forget it myself. But I'm Sangimee, and my grandfather taught me Sangimee medicine when I was a boy. You remember his house way out on Donley Street?"

"Yes," Helena said.

"It was still all woods behind his house then, and starting when I was about five, he began to take me to a secret place he had in there, and he taught me the lore. That's how it works — the medicine man always teaches it to his grandson, not his son. For better or worse, long before any of the other tribes, the Sangimee joined 'em when they saw they couldn't lick 'em, and for two hundred and fifty years now we've lived just like our neighbors. But during all that time the medicine men passed on the lore to their grandsons, or to boys adopted as grandsons for that purpose. And it's not just superstition. Sangimee medicine has some very real powers, and the lore recounts a good many things that sound like fairy tales, but are hard, simple truth. I know.

"During the last ten years or so, I've seen quite a lot of Gordon, selling off his land for him. You know Gordon. He goes for anything trendy, especially young people's fads. Goes all out for a while, until something else takes his attention. Disco dancing, anti-draft, cocaine, anti-nuke — he has his little fling at whatever is 'in.' Most of 'em seem kind of nasty to me, but then I'm a bourgeois flag-waver."

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"He calls me a fascist," Helena said.

"Oh, sure. He'd call me one too, except that I'm an Oppressed Minority. I bother him because I don't behave the way his stereotype says I should. When the Indian Rights thing was the big fad with the trendy people, he jumped in with both feet, of course; and while he was still enthusiastic about it, he pestered me a lot for information about what he called Tribal Customs of Native Americans. I let it slip that I was trained as a medicine man, and he zeroed in on that. It fascinated him. I ended up telling him about the Festamatis."

"Festamatis?"

"According to the legend, a malign spirit that lives in a dead tree. It can be invoked by an appropriate spell, and it will do your dirty work for you, at a price. The price is one human life. It's described as a bitterly cold black mist that surrounds its victim and then passes on, leaving a stone-cold corpse. But the life it contracts to take won't do for its fee; there has to be another. In most of the stories you can guess how it came out: the person who invoked the Festamatis was himself killed as the payment. Of course, in some of the tales the Festamatis was outsmarted.

"Gordon wouldn't give me any peace until I taught him the spell. I didn't see any harm in it. I'd tried it myself a few times, and I couldn't make it work. Oh, once I got a bunch of little blind flying balls of fur that were kind of scary, but harmless. These incantations are pretty complex: a mispronounced word, or one pitched wrong, can invalidate the whole thing, or maybe change it to another spell entirely. If I couldn't get the thing right, it was certain Gordon couldn't. So I gave him a set of rattles and taught him the spell and counterspell. I was trying just then to get another point on my commission and wanted to do him a favor.

"He tried it out, he told me, and when nothing happened he wasn't surprised — I don't suppose he ever really believed it — and he put the rattles in a drawer and forgot about it. But recently, when he finally decided that the only way out of his difficulties was to do you in, Helena, he thought about the Festamatis and decided to give it another try.

"About two this morning I woke up suddenly, knowing that somewhere not too far off a spell had just been successful, and that it had to be Gordon's work. I was a little scared, to tell the truth; if there is such a thing as the Festamatis, and he'd managed to raise it, he might just be pointing it at me. We've had our share of quarrels, in the course of our deals. I got my rattles ready, just in case.

"After a couple of hours I concluded that I was safe, and I thought I'd better investigate. I got dressed and went out to Gordon's. He'd raised something, all right, but not the Festamatis; what he has are two of the ugliest monsters you ever saw, and

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damned dangerous ones, in the bargain. But I don't think they're supernatural; probably the last of a species that's extinct, except for them. They'd been in some kind of suspended animation since God-knows-when. Gordon's screwed-up spell woke them, and by the greatest of damn-fool luck, the counterspell put them back under. I found Gordon and his little friend scared out of their wits — the things had eaten Gordon's big dog like a pretzel — and the monsters were laid out stiff on that white carpet he's so fond of.

"Gordon and I had a nice little chat. He wanted my help, and I wormed the whole story out of him while Dennis was off changing his jeans. His mind is absolutely made up that you've got to die; when he tried to invoke the Festamatis, it was a last desperate effort to get the job done cheap. (He was going to give Dennis to the Festamatis as the payment.) If that failed, then he'd go ahead with a professional contract on your life, but that was going to be extremely expensive, and to raise the money he'd have to sell his house, the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

"So he was looking for a way to use the critters on the carpet to take care of you, since they were conveniently at hand, and, he figured, would come cheaper than the Festamatis, and he'd get to keep Dennis. He wanted me to figure out how to sic the monsters on you. He dropped hints about all the dandy commissions that would fall to me once he came into his money.

"I told him I'd try to figure something out, and that meanwhile he was to do absolutely nothing about the sleeping beauties in his living room, and that he should let absolutely no one at all into his house. I told him I'd let him know what to do sometime today. Then I came over here to advise you to hand over the money without delay. Which you now tell me you can't do."

Helena had sat quietly as he talked. Now she said. "That's pretty strange stuff, Eddie. Is it honest and truly the truth?"

He looked at her soberly. "It's the truth."

"Well," she said. "Well, then. I'll do whatever you say. Imagine, planning to hand poor little Dennis over to that Festis thing. Shameful. Now, how are we going to kill Gordon?"

"Not *we*," Smithers said. "The Nedake-ne-kevis. *They'll* kill him. And in front of witnesses, just to make sure no suspicion attaches to you — or me. I've got the place picked out, and the witnesses."

"Where, Eddie? Who?"

"Oh, I've worked up a slick little scheme. You see, Gordon will have to believe that the witnesses are for *his* benefit, to give him an alibi for the time your death is supposed to be taking place. And because there's simply no way to schedule matters with any kind of precise timing, it has to be at a place where the witnesses will be on

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hand at whatever time it takes place. On top of that, it has to be reasonably close to both Gordon's house and yours. It works out to just one area: somewhere close to that commune on Gore's Survey. It's located right, and there are always enough people around to make it certain that someone will see Gordon being killed by, uh, individuals that in no way resemble you or me. But just to be safe, you'd better have some guests in tonight. The descriptions of the killers are going to sound pretty strange to the police, and they might decide that what's being described came out of something the witnesses smoked or dropped."

"Very clever," Helena said, "but what makes you think your 'individuals' will be in the right place at the right time?"

"Your local medicine man has a method. I've got grandpa's *freese*. A sort of musical instrument, a very primitive recorder, I guess you'd call it. What comes out of it isn't exactly music — it only has three notes — but by blowing on it you can control all sorts of creatures. I imagine the Pied Piper legend grew out of something of the kind. I think I can use it to manipulate Gordon's ghouls, the way the Pied Piper led the rats and the children. Of course, up to now I've only used it for a game call. Works fine on geese and wild turkeys."

Helena rose from her chair, walked to the window, and stared out of it for a time. "Eddie," she said, "I can hardly believe this. Do you realize what we're doing? We're conspiring to murder."

"Well, I don't know," Smithers said. "More like self-defense, really. Or maybe extermination. Gordon's a pretty nasty article, when you come right down to it. He really believes I'd help him kill you for the sake of a few commissions. But we don't have to do it."

"That's the trouble," she said. "I'm afraid we do."

Gordon said much the same thing. He and Smithers were sitting in the dining room drinking tea. He said, "There's no use talking about it, Smithers. I'm going to do it. Are you going to help me or not? There's a lot of money at stake, you know. And you're already in pretty deep."

"Oh, sure, Gordon, I'll help you," Smithers said. "I just thought you might have changed your mind. The main thing is, it's got to be done as soon as possible. Those things can't be left in there a minute longer than absolutely necessary."

"Amen!" Gordon said.

"So we'll do it tonight. Okay?"

"Tonight? Well — well, sure. Sure. Uh...what are we going to do, exactly?"

"Why, you'll cast the spell to wake them, and I'll Pied-Piper them over to your aunt's house. After they've done the job, I'll pipe them back here again and then back into their tunnel, and you'll put them back to sleep — for the

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next thousand years, I hope. The important thing is your alibi. You'll need witnesses to your whereabouts for at least a couple of hours, to give you plenty of coverage both before and after the act. That means you'll have to do the wake-up incantation right in front of your witnesses. So here's what you're going to do. You'll go over somewhere close to that commune on Gore's Survey and put on a big Red-Indian act, Hollywood style. Put on some war paint. Build a fire and have Dennis beat a drum. Dance around and whoop and holler. When the communards ask what you're up to, say you're propitiating the Nature Gods, or something. When you cast the spell, it'll just seem to be part of the general carrying on. How does that sound?"

"It sounds okay. Like fun, even. Those people will dig it. Probably try and join in. It's their kind of thing."

"I wouldn't be surprised. Now, the timing. It'll be getting dark by six thirty, and full dark a half hour after that. Have your fire built, and start your act at seven. Cast the spell at seven thirty. And be sure you time it right, because I'm going to be here with your sleeping friends, and I don't want to be caught by surprise when they wake up. Knock off the theatricals at nine sharp, say good-bye to the hippies (don't forget to mention the time) and get back here as fast as you can. And now I'm going home and get some sleep. You'd better do the same. I'll be back to see you off."

* * *

At a little after six Gordon and Dennis took their departure, Dennis fluttering apprehensively, and Gordon alternating between fits of elation and funk. After the station wagon had disappeared down the driveway, Smithers entered the living room. The two creatures lay as they had fallen. The blood on the carpet had turned black, and only a trace of the stench remained in the air. Smithers was carrying a canvas gymnasium bag. From it he took a pair of rattles like those he had given Gordon, and a crude small wind instrument. He blew tentatively into the instrument a few times, eliciting a mournful honking, and then put it into his pocket. He took up the rattles. "Okay, pals," he said, "the beauty sleep's over. Time to wake up and go to work."

He moved into the doorway, where there was a clear line of flight behind him, and began to shake the rattles and chant. After a time the leg of one of the creatures jerked, and the other one made a movement of its head. Smithers dropped the rattles and pulled the *freese* from his pocket. As the pair rose ponderously to their feet, he began to pipe.

It was an unpleasant sound, monotonous in pitch and irritating in its lack of identifiable rhythm. For a time the creatures paid no heed, but snuffled and grunted to each other and peered about in slow bewilderment, until the effect of the *freese* at last penetrat-

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ed the dim minds; then, as one creature, they turned and looked at Smithers.

Sweat appeared on his face, and he held himself ready to bolt, but there was no hesitation in the flow of sound. He blew a long, irregularly interrupted note, a sound not unlike slow Morse code, and glared at the creatures with furious concentration. Suddenly, and in unison, they swung up their right arms in a Roman salute.

Smithers took the *freese* from his mouth and wiped his face. He said, "Well. Okay. Gotcha. Now we'll practice a little." They were standing without motion, frozen in the salute. He put the pipe to his mouth and again blew the note, concentrating his stare upon the creatures as before. They began to move, at first in absolute unison, and then, as Smithers' skill and confidence grew, as individuals. He marched them up and down the room, clumsily in the beginning, with a consequent breakage of a number of Gordon's possessions, but in the end with precision, so that they threaded their way among the furniture with scarcely a collision. Smithers said at last, "Right. We're ready, I guess. Forward, *march!*" He blew again.

In single file they marched out of the room, through the open front door, and down the steps, with Smithers following. They crossed the lawn, passed through a gateway in a low stone wall, and set out through the woods. It was growing dark, but there was still enough light for the creatures to be seen, and Smithers kept at a distance, moving in the deepest shadows. Once launched into motion, the pair continued to plod without further instruction; Smithers blew the *freese* only to change their direction from time to time.

Gore's Survey was a wasteland, a tract of fifteen or twenty acres that still retained the name of an old three-thousand-acre grant to a pioneer named Gore, who had parceled it out in estates and farms in the middle of the eighteenth century. It had been highly desirable land at the time Gore took it, and during the next two centuries its value increased continuously, so that over the years most of the tracts changed hands many times. Along the way, a great many were divided into smaller farms, and as early as the nineteen thirties some of these were being further subdivided into residential building lots. Any large tracts that remained intact acquired enormous value. The two Evans estates had been in that category.

It was rolling countryside, topographically varying from gentle slopes to moderate hillsides. A good deal of the aboriginal forest remained, mingled with prosperous farms. Clean small streams ran through it; there was an abundance of game. It was green and golden in the summer, and in autumn a carnival of reds and yellows. The winters were cold and white, but they spoke more of fat hibernation

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than of frozen hunger. Nature was kind, here.

Except to the tract of acreage that still kept the old name; that had been blighted, somehow. Nothing grew there except a flaky dry lichen, and that only in spots. The land lay amid the greenery like a gray sore, an irregular blotch of sterility. From time to time down the years, someone would buy it from the county for a trifling price and spend a few years and a good deal of money on one scheme or another — complex drainage systems, irrigation, sophisticated fertilizers and chemicals — to make it productive. The schemes always failed, and in due course the county would take it for taxes again.

In 1925 one of the hopeful entrepreneurs built a house on the tract, an undistinguished wooden farmhouse which, after its abandonment, sheltered squatters from time to time. Its current occupants were relics of the decade of drugs and violence, aging debris of the storms of the time. They lived in the past, still vaguely convinced that cooking their brains with chemicals and living in squalor revenged them somehow on a world that had passed them by and that found their existence irrelevant to its concerns. Their livelihood came from a regular cash remittance of mysterious origins, which was paid in consideration of their harboring and hiding a fugitive left over from the stormy past, a zealot who had once planted a bomb in the history stacks of a university library and managed to blow up an elderly night watchman along with the books.

These were Smithers' witnesses, not the most credible, perhaps, but in the right place at the right time. They were assembled on the rotting porch of the house as he and his monstrous puppets reached the edge of the woods. The war dance had quite successfully engaged their attention, and they watched with dreamy approval as Gordon capered around a great bonfire to Dennis's erratic thumping on a set of bongo drums.

Smithers blew a honk that froze his charges in place behind a dense thicket, and cautiously approached through the shadows for a clear view. Gordon was speaking to Dennis, who stopped drumming. Gordon took up the rattles. He began the incantation.

"Dead on time," Smithers said. "Get set, fellas." He waited. After a time he said, "Go," and blew. The creatures stumped out of the bushes and moved ponderously toward Gordon's fire.

A fog lay upon Gore's Survey, a fog that had not been there before the incantation began. It coiled and eddied sluggishly along the ground, thickening gradually as the chant proceeded, rising no higher than a man's waist. It ended abruptly at the border of the dead land. Smithers eyed it with apprehension; he kept the *freese* close to his mouth.

Gordon's incantation ended with a

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truncated, minor-key drone and an elaborate flourish of the rattles. There was a moment of utter stillness. Then something came from under the earth.

The dry, ashen soil shifted, heaved, and split; through the opening rose the figure of a man, an Indian warrior in deerskins. He seemed to be unfolding himself from a doubled-up position, stretching slowly to his full height. As he did so, the sporadic red glare of the bonfire showed his arms to be bound tight to his sides. On his face was an expression of unutterable pain, of an agony beyond any nightmare of agony. He stood for a long moment, his head thrown back, seeming to stare at the black sky. And then, between one flicker of the fire and the next, his face changed: the black gape of his silent scream was erased, the knotted contortion of the facial muscles softened and relaxed; an old suffering had ended, and its marks were wiped away. On the face at that instant of deliverance was an expression of serenity and peace.

But only for that instant; then there was no face, there was no warrior. There was only a fine dust that floated and swirled gently for a moment and was dispersed by the eddies of the mist.

"A Tehama!" Smithers said. "Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph."

Suddenly there were things in the fog, fitfully visible through the slow coilings. They were a host, a swarm: foot-high stick-figures with heads like the skulls of toothed reptiles, deep grinning mouths wide in soundless shrieks of hate. They were in furious motion, making for the fire, the small limbs like flailing black wires.

They reached Dennis first, where he sat frozen with the drums in his lap. They were over him like locusts, razor teeth tearing and ripping, little black talons clawing in a frenzy. In a moment they dropped away. Dennis toppled to the ground, quite dead. There was not a mark on his body.

Smithers' puppets had almost reached the fire, now, plodding along mechanically, not to be stopped or turned except by the pipe that had set them in motion. The swarm boiled and swirled and raced at them, and up and over them, enveloping both as it had enveloped Dennis. The thick bodies continued to plod. Teeth and claws without number tore at them with insenate ferocity; their pace did not vary. The swarm dropped off them; they were dead. And still the bodies marched for a few more steps before they dropped. They were no more marked by the savage rending than Dennis had been.

All of this had taken no more than two minutes, and Smithers had not moved a muscle. Now he broke free of his paralysis. "Run!" he bawled to the group on the porch. "Run! Run!"

They paid no attention. Perhaps in their chemical trances they had often watched even stranger things and perceived this as nothing very different. One or two applauded, and one said,

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"Yeah!" And then the swarm was upon them.

It left them sprawled in death on the decayed planks, and surged into the house and out again, and violently boiled about on the gray earth. The movement was perceptibly slower than it had been in the beginning, and they could be made out individually, the hard thin limbs and small terrible heads, the feral little mouths wide in their soundless shrieks. Smithers was shuddering and sweating copiously in the chilly night air. He put the pipe to his mouth and once again blew.

The movement slowed further as he piped, and little by little the swarm coalesced into a dense pack, a shifting, flickering blanket of predatory small horrors covering several square yards of the dead soil. Smithers turned and entered the forest. They followed.

It was dawn again when Smithers rang Helena's bell. He said, "Don't talk, Signe. Just get me some whiskey and call Helena." She took one look at him and obeyed without a word.

When Helena entered the room, she found him slumped in a chair, drinking the whiskey. He said, "Well, it's done. You're rid of Gordon. And Dennis and the hippies, too. And damn near me." He had the look of a soldier who has been too long under fire.

She said, "Signe's making breakfast. Eat something, and then you can tell me about it. Come along." Smithers carried the bottle with him.

The dining room was airy and sunny, and a canary sang in a cage. Smithers had eaten bacon and eggs and reduced the bottle's level by several inches. His eyes had lost some of their wildness, and the tension on his face was softening into simple weariness. "Gordon got the spell a little wrong, again," he said. "It shouldn't have mattered, because I'd already activated the corpse-eaters, and what he was doing — even though he didn't know it — was just window-dressing. But it worked, and worked wrong, and he set free a Tehama that had been set to restrain a nest of — I guess 'Biters' would be the best translation. I'd better explain what those things are.

"The Biters are just about the worst things the legends tell about, little horrors so thoroughly evil that they were loathed by even the wickedest of the spirits. The myth has it that long ago the Great Good Spirit, Gitche-Manito, prevailed in single combat over his opposite, Hake-Manito, and struck him such a blow that Hake-Manito was shattered into a million million pieces. But each of the pieces retained life, and each had only one aim: to kill. To kill anything and everything, animal and vegetable, fish, fowl, and corn.

"Gitche-Manito buried them in various places all over the world. But of course simple burial wouldn't hold them, and so he put a safeguard at each burial place: a Tehama. The Biters could be confined only if they could

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kill. So he gave them something to kill. He took the bad medicine men, the ones who had served Hake-Manito, and buried one with each clutch of Biters. Buried them alive, for the Biters to kill. And ever since, they have been killed by the Biters ten thousand times a day, every day, suffering agonizing death endlessly repeated, and yet they cannot die. And for so long as they do not die, the Biters can continue to kill them, and so somewhat slake their thirst for killing, and will remain in restraint.

"But Gordon's spell released the Tehama; he died at last, was delivered from his long agony. When he died, the Biters were no longer confined to the grave, and they came out. They came out and killed, did enough killing to take the edge off their appetite, so I could control them, more or less, with the *freese*. I piped them over to Gordon's house and down into the tunnel the ghouls came out of, and bricked up the tunnel. And then I came down with the worst case of the shakes you ever saw. Those things are awful, Helena. You can't imagine how awful.

"I stopped by Gore's Survey on my way back here. It's pretty clear, now, what made it a desert, why nothing ever grew there. That'll be changing. But it doesn't look so good this morning. Enough corpses for a small battlefield. The things from the tunnel aren't there, though; just a couple of wet spots on the ground. They must have totally decomposed, bones and all. Odd chemistry there. Somebody'll be finding the bodies pretty soon now, and calling the sheriff. I wonder what the autopsies'll show. The bodies aren't marked. It seems the Biters don't actually bite. It may be that they don't even have any physical being. But they kill, all right. They do kill."

Smithers gulped the rest of his whiskey and stared out the window. Helena said, "It's all pretty strange, Eddie. And pretty awful. And very hard to believe, to tell the truth. Did it really happen?"

"Oh, it happened. You'll be hearing all about the bodies they'll find at Gore's Survey. I expect they'll end up calling it some kind of dope poisoning.... There's about fifteen hundred dollars back taxes on that land. I can get it for that plus costs. I think I'd better do it today. It's going to be getting green, now. Going to be good land. Be worth something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Half a million, maybe."

"If it's true. If it's not true, it's not worth the back taxes. Nothing ever grew there — ever."

"It will now," Smithers said, confidently.

"Well, then. We both gain something, don't we?"

"I'm a businessman," Smithers said. "If an opportunity comes up, I try to take advantage of it. You should, too. Gordon's house will be yours, now. You'd better sell it as quick as

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you can. I have a notion the blight will be hitting that area pretty soon."

"All right, I will. I can use the money.... We're pretty cold-blooded, aren't we?"

"Nothing wrong with taking advantage of something that's already happened. A little hard on the hippies, I admit. Best think of it as a natural disaster, something that couldn't be helped."

"Yes," Helena said. "That's what I'll do."

In the afternoon Smithers drove his gas-guzzler up the mountain to the end of a derelict road. When it became impossible to drive any further, he left the car and proceeded on foot through the trees to a clearing. He was dressed in old khakis and a leather jacket and moccasins. He gathered wood and built a small fire; when the fire had burnt itself down to bright coals and a tiny column of white smoke was rising vertically from it into the still air, he began softly to chant. From the pocket of his jacket he took a handful of something which he dropped onto the coals.

Dense smoke rose and spread and began to churn and eddy, although there was no wind. In a few minutes the movement ceased, and it hung in a motionless small cloud around the bed of coals. It had thinned enough to permit a certain murky visibility, except for a clot of considerable density across the fire from Smithers. Smithers spoke to the clot: "Is it you, ghost of my grandfather?"

He heard a reply, or thought he heard one, and he said, "To tell you how things go with me, Grandfather. To tell you that I have contended with the Biters and have prevailed over them." He paused, listening. He said, "A Tehama was released through bungling, and the Biters came forth and killed. When their first frenzy was over, I could control them with the *freese*, and now they are as they were before. They are — I think this will make you laugh, Grandfather — they are in a tunnel under a house. The tunnel was formerly the burial place of two corpse-eaters that are now destroyed."

He listened again and said, "They are safely confined. I have given them a new Tehama. They will feed on him perpetually, and for so long as they do, they cannot escape. The Great Spirit's arrangement has been restored." He paused. "A man named Gordon Evans. A bad man, Grandfather. As bad as any of those medicine men who once served the evil spirit. The religion of this man's fathers preaches a hell. He has something worse, now. The eternal fires he was taught to fear must seem to him today like a cool oasis, a place to be longed for. And what he is suffering now, he must suffer forever. Or so we should hope. His deliverance would free the Biters again, and that must not happen. He released the old Tehama through his efforts to do mur-

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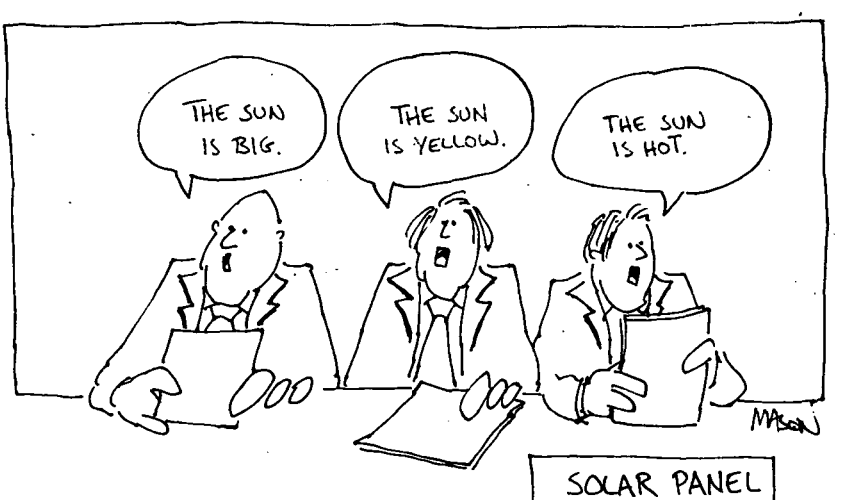
der. It is only just that he serve as the new Tehama."

Another pause. He said, "Oh, pretty good, Grandfather. The game laws keep getting worse. I'm only allowed to shoot one deer a year, but I usually poach a couple more. My wife died a few years ago. I have a grandson, six months old now. I don't know whether I'll teach him the lore or lot. I'm not sure it wouldn't be an impediment to him. He's going to be pretty busy with his regular education. I've already entered him for his prep school, and he'll be going to Harvard or Princeton in due course. He'll have a lot of money when I finally join you over there, Grandfather. I want to prepare him to be a rich man ... Grandfather? Grandfather?"

A faint breeze had come up, and the smoke had dispersed. Smithers scooped dirt over the remains of his fire and trod on it. He returned through the woods to his car, performed the complicated maneuvers necessary to turn it around in the narrow roadway, and drove down the mountain.

The mountain road led to a blacktop, and that to the highway. He pulled off the highway at Gore's Survey and parked for a time, staring reflectively out at the landscape. The dead fields rolled away to the distant tree line as they had always done, lying sterile and gray in the fading light. There was no sign yet of the green future. But it was only the first day.

He drove on and at the Alfred Evans place turned in at the driveway. Nothing had changed here, either, except that around the house the flowers were just beginning to droop.



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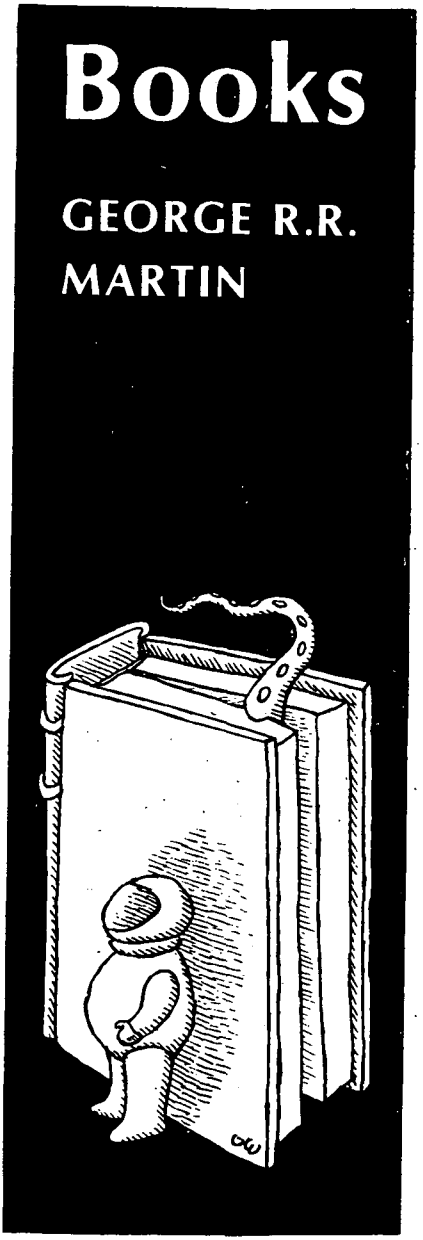

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

This article is in response to Thomas M. Disch's February 1981 column, in which he discussed the work of a generation of sf writers he labeled "The Labor Day Group."

I became a professional writer a little over ten years ago, when my first sale appeared in the pages of Galaxy. My initiation proceeded in jig time; no sooner had I published for the first time than I found myself being reviewed for the first time. But not, unfortunately, for the last time.

A writer has to become accustomed to dealing with reviews, and I think I've done a fair job of that. You get all sorts of notices in this business, and you have to be prepared for them. They run the gamut from incisive and brilliant to utterly moronic, from mealy-mouthed adulation to sheer vitriol. It would be tidy if the dumb ones were all negative, and the intelligent ones a-chock with praise, but unfortunately it doesn't work that way.

However varied they may be, reviews do have one thing in common: a writer is better off ignoring them. It's generally a waste of time and energy replying to them, no matter how much you have the urge, no matter what the cretin said. In my ten years in the field, I've fumed and clucked over dozens of reviews, and mouthed off to my friends about them, but it's seldom that I've actually taken typewriter in hand in an effort to reply to a reviewer or critic.

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Every rule has to have its exception, though. Every once in a good long while, a review comes along that is wrongheaded enough, yet also intelligent and perceptive enough, to require discussion and rebuttal.

Such a review appeared in the February *Books* column of F&SF, when Thomas M. Disch discussed the Labor Day Group.

This was one I heard coming long before it pounced upon me. At a New Year's Party in Albuquerque, various F&SF subscribers who'd gotten the issue ahead of the rest of us kept coming up to me and offering condolences. All of them hastened to add that at least I hadn't gotten it as bad as Ed Bryant. When the issue finally hit the stands, I picked it up with a considerable amount of apprehension, wondering what brand of mayhem had been wrought upon me this time.

Actually, it wasn't so bad. Pretty mild, in fact, after the horrors I'd imagined from the scraps and outlines my subscriber friends had given me. Truthfully, I've gotten much worse reviews, although I'll admit that poor Ed Bryant probably has not.

Some of you undoubtedly are familiar with the Disch column I'm speaking of; others may not be, however. Briefly, in the context of reviewing the three Best-of-the-Year anthologies, Disch passed beyond a simple discussion of the stories to a larger analysis of the work of a group of young writers he dubbed "the Labor Day Group," because they could most often be found together at the World SF Convention over the Labor Day weekend. According to Disch, the membership of the Group included Vonda McIntyre, Tanith Lee, Jack Dann, Michael Bishop, Orson Scott Card, John Varley, and poor innocent me. This roster appears to have derived primarily from the contents pages of the three anthologies that Disch had to hand, which would seem to make him guilty of a slick bit of circular reasoning: first he chooses the Group membership from a look at these collections, then points out how the Labor Day Groupers seem to dominate the Best-of-the-Year books and the awards.

There are various other lapses one might point out in Disch's essay. For example, Michael Bishop is a rather unlikely member for anything called the Labor Day Group. Bishop has never attended a worldcon, and therefore has clearly missed all the meetings. However, Disch does say that Mike is "the least representative figure" in the Group, so ... Disch also talks about Connie Willis' "Daisy, In the Sun," as being the writer's first published story, which it is not. That's a simple factual mistake, however. I could complain about the dumb joke he makes of Ed Bryant's name, rendering it as "bryAnt" in parody of Ed's Nebula-winning "giAnts," but that's probably understandable coming from a man who has undoubtedly been subjected to a lifetime of humor about plates and

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saucers. Were I of a mind to, I would gladly take issue with Disch's suggestion about my own story, "The Way of Cross and Dragon." Disch thinks the story might grow teeth were it set in 100 A.D. instead of the far future. Myself, I think that change would take what is intended as a universal statement about truth, falsehood, and all belief systems and render it into a simple-minded slap at Christianity. Nothing wrong with slapping Christianity from time to time, to be sure, especially as embodied by the Moral Majority ... but that wasn't what the story was about.

All that is minor, though, and not really to the point. A rather larger concern is Disch's treatment of Ed Bryant's "giAnts." That's also beside the point, actually, but I can't resist talking about it. The truth is, condolences from my friends notwithstanding, Disch let me off rather easily, giving a mixed review to "The Way of Cross and Dragon" and a generally favorable one to "Sandkings." Poor Ed, however, gets flayed and hung out to twist slowly, slowly in the wind. One could say that Tom Disch did not like "giAnts." One could. In fact, what he says is, "For a *writer's* organization to give an award to such a story as 'giAnts' is tantamount to erecting a sign at the airlock, saying: 'Science Fiction — abandon taste, all ye who enter here.'"

Now, in fact, "giAnts" was not really the best choice for the Nebula. As I've told Ed on countless occasions, "The Way of Cross and Dragon" is a much better story. Nor is "giAnts" by any means my favorite Ed Bryant story ... still, Disch is a bit harsh. If he was heaping all this scorn on a writer worthy of it, that would be one thing, but in fact he is so far off base it's ridiculous. Judging from his review, Disch seems to think that "giAnts" is about giant insects. This is a rather simple-minded view of the story, akin to saying that Disch's own novel *The Genocides* is about horticulture. Bryant has big bugs in his story, and Disch has big plants, but in each case there is a bit more going on than that summary might indicate.

From the review, it would appear that Disch is not really familiar with the bulk of Bryant's work. Over the years Ed has been one of the more subtle, tricky, and non-commercial of what Disch calls the Labor Day Group, and in literary terms certainly one of the most ambitious, but Disch reads Bryant as if he were reading Lin Carter, as if the surface was all there was to a story, and by so doing misreads "giAnts" completely.

That being said, let me add that this kind of thing is par for the course in all too many reviews. Despite all my cavils about Disch's F&SF essay, I would never have bothered to reply to it if this were all there was to the piece. That is not the case. The thing that makes Disch's column worthy of attention is his central thesis: the idea of the Labor Day Group, and the things he

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says about it. Disch is often unfair and often mistaken, but at the core of his review is a gritty bit of truth.

He says:

> I don't mean to suggst that anything like a cabal is at work, only that a coherent generational grouping exists ... Further, I'd suggest that these writers have more in common *as a group* than those (myself among them) who were lumped together under the rubric "New Wave," that they possess something approaching solidarity, as the Futurians did in their day.

Disch soon goes wrong again, in ways I'll discuss shortly, but that statement is the heart of his thesis, and it is one that I find myself in surprising agreement with. The observation isn't entirely original. In another F&SF column a few years back, Algis Budrys talked about a "school" of younger SF writers with certain things in common, and inducted me into the group, along with Greg Benford and a few others.

Disch expands on the idea far more than Budrys did, however, and by giving these writers a collective name he gives critics, fans, academics, and other troublemakers a convenient label to grab on to. The Labor Day Group. Doesn't mean much, actually, but it has a nice ring to it. Like the New Wave, or the Futurians, it can be grasped easily, and then we can move on to discussing who is a member and who isn't, whether those in the Group are better or worse than those who aren't, and what the members have in common, and similar fun pastimes. It has been a decade since the end of the Old Wave/New Wave battles; that war was dying even as I was making my first sale. Yet most of our genre histories end with the demise of the New Wave, and say almost nothing about what has transpired since, though they do customarily append a list of names, in which I sometimes appear (so I pay attention). The field *has* taken new directions since the days of *Dangerous Visions* and *Stand on Zanzibar*, and however wrong he might be in the details, Disch is to be commended for opening the discussion about what — and how desirable — those directions might be.

It's there that I think Disch wanders afield again. He is correct in saying that a "coherent generational grouping" can be discerned among the younger writers in the field, those who have first published during the past decade. The comparison with the Futurians is not at all inappropriate, though there is no evidence that any of the Labor Day Group ever shared an apartment or hatched schemes for conquering all fandom. There are very important difference between my work and that of Ed Bryant, or John Varley, or Vonda McIntyre, or Greg Benford (who wasn't in the Labor Day Group, but ought to have been), or Michael Bishop ... yet there are important commonalities as well. Resonances. One can sense a certain amount of shared

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attitudes, a similiarty of views on literature, SF, writing. Futurians like Pohl, Kornbluth, Knight, and Blish were by no means interchangeable, yet they did represent a coherent literary movement of sorts, an answer to Campbellian science fiction, and their work helped move the field in a different direction. I think the same is true of the Labor Day Group.

And that's where Thomas M. Disch and I part company again.

Disch's essay talks a lot about awards. He thinks the Labor Day Group takes the Hugos and Nebulas too seriously. He says so at sufficient length to convince me that Disch actually attaches more importance to awards than anybody in the Group. He even cites me to support his case.

> The awards are a serious business. If there were any doubt of that, one need only listen to the testimony of the winners, one of whom, George Martin, in accepting his award this year, spoke of how he'd lusted after a Hugo when first he'd attended a world convention in the early days of his career ... the work of this latest generation of sf writers ... has been unduly and unnecessarily influenced by the clubhouse atmosphere of the sf world and its awards systems. A sense of personal vision is rare in their stories, while a sense of writing to please a particular audience, Fandom, is sometimes obtrusively present...

In other words, the charge that Disch is levelling at the members of the Labor Day Group is nothing less than literary whoring. He goes on to expand on this:

> Having served their literary apprenticeships in the sf magazines during the '70s (a decade otherwise notable for disillusionment and rentrenchment), they were witness to the failure of the "New Wave" both as an esthetic program (art can't be brought into existence by manifestos) and commercially. To a reasonably level-headed apprentice writer it became increasingly clear through the '70s that art was a problematical commodity and most of what went by that name was claptrap anyhow. By contrast a competent entertainment engineer who could guarantee n-pages of fictionware might do very well for himself. Look at what happened to *Star Wars*. What the market rewards are simple problems clearly solved by wholesome, likeable characters ... It was good enough for grandpa, it was good enough for grandma, and it's good enough for the Labor Day Group. If Art's to be part of it, it must be the kind that conceals art, and conceals it well; on the whole, it isn't worth troubling about.

This is a rather extraordinary outburst, really. Clever and well-said, as might be expected of a writer of Disch's calibre, but grotesquely wrongheaded. One wonders exactly how much Disch has read of the writers he inducts into the Labor Day Group. Very little beyond the stories in those three anthologies, one suspects. It is difficult to discern exactly whom he is talking about.

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All this stuff about competent entertainment engineers guaranteeing n-pages of "fictionware" (God! what a term!) is scathing enough, but whom does it apply to? Me? I published one novel during my first decade as a writer. Ed Bryant, who is still trying to do his first real novel, who agonizes to produce two or three marvelously crafted shorts each year? Vonda, who has two novels and a collection? Oh, to be sure, some of the Labor Day Group writers are fairly prolific, notably Varley and Card, but on the whole a less reliable bunch of entertainment engineers would be hard to find. If you really wanted n-pages of fictionware quickly, you'd be better off going to your friendly neighborhood New Waver, like Michael Moorcock f'rinstance. And wholesome, likeable characters? In Michael Bishop? In Ed Bryant? Disch can't have read "Shark" or "Hibukusha Gallery" or anything much by Bishop. Simple problems clearly solved? Right. Simple problems like love, and death, and human sexuality, and existential loneliness, and God, and morality and ... as for the clear solutions, I had a character who solved a problem once. Think I wrote that story in '73, or maybe it was '72.

No, whomever Disch is castigating here, it can't be the Labor Day Group. He paints with a broad brush indeed, but he's painting a straw man. I've never met Tanith Lee, but I know the rest of those Disch lists as members of the Group, Jack and Herb and Ed and Mike Bishop and Vonda and so on. Some I know well, some not so well, but I know all of them well enough to say with a certainty that not a one has ever been guilty of the kind of literary whoring that Disch implies is their — our — stock in trade. Among the qualities that *I* would list as characteristic of the Group, in fact, is high literary ambition, and a devotion to art that is second to no one in the field, no, not even to Mr. Thomas M. Disch himself. Whether these ambitions are realized or not is another question. Some of those in the Group are better writers than others. Some stories succeed more than others. We all have off days, and some of us have off years. But to imply that the Labor Day Group is composed of a bunch of cynical hacks, churning out reams of crassly commercial fiction solely for money and awards while washing their hands of art, that is a base and empty accusation, one unworthy of a writer as talented as Disch, and one that shows he has neither consulted with the Group members about their views, nor read any significant portion of their work.

As to awards, when I accepted the Hugo for "The Way of Cross and Dragon" I did indeed talk about how I had lusted for such recognition when I attended my first worldcon back in 1971. I submit, however, that this is a normal and natural sort of human desire, and I suspect that once upon a time, when he was a wee tad, Tom Disch probably dreamed similar

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dreams. For that matter, Disch was also up for a Hugo last year at Noreascon II, and I wonder if, in his heart of hearts, Disch wasn't just as lustful as I was.

His real error, though, is taking my simple declaration that I had dreamed of someday winning a Hugo, and standing it on its head in order to imply that I — and by extension, the rest of the Group — was deliberately *writing* in an effort to cop awards. Aiming at popularity, so to speak. There is a big difference.

Do I ever think of Hugos and Nebulas, scheme to win them? Well, yes and no. I like following our field's literary awards, just as I like following the baseball standings. Both are games, and games can be fun. The comparison is pretty apt, actually. By and large, the award-winners are good stories, as pennant-winners are good teams. But I have no illusions that the best story always wins, no more than the best team always wins in baseball (The Brooklyn Dodgers were the best team in baseball in the early 50s, and I don't care *how* many World Series they lost to the Yankees!). I am aware that the awards mean money too, and I take this into consideration when marketing my stories. I think that's sensible, professional, ethical.

But I don't *write* for awards, don't warp my stories to suit any audience, no matter what Disch may think. And that is the distinction. I am told that Ernest Hemingway once said, "While I'm writing, I'm an artist; as soon as I've finished, I'm a son-of-a-bitch." I suspect that is the attitude held by most of the Labor Day Group about awards, not the one Disch ascribes to us.

As for the other Group attitudes, my own theory is that this generation of writers, arising in the '70s, represents a fusion of the two warring camps of the '60s. We were the first children of the Space Age, postwar babies still in school when Sputnik was launched. We grew up loving the flying wing and horror movies and Muttnik, cut our literary teeth on Heinlein juveniles and Andre Norton and comic books. The pulps were before our time, but we mainlined Ace doubles. And so we had one foot firmly in the camp of traditional SF, the camp of high technology and high adventure and boundless optimism and tall bright dreams. Yet we were also the generation of Viet Nam, the flower children and anarchists and peaceniks of the '60s, disillusioned, questioning, idealistic. The New Wave was part of that, a sign of the ferment of the times, and even when the stories were unreadable we identified with the effort, emotionally. Yes, as Disch says, we saw the New Wave fail. But he is wrong when he says that this failure turned us all into literary journeymen churning out the yardgoods. The real story is one of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The division between "popular" and "literary" fiction is a recent and heinous one.

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There is no reason that great art can't be popular, or that popular fiction can't be art. And that is really what I think the Labor Day Group is about, at heart. Combining the color and verve and unconscious power of the best of traditional SF with the literary concerns of the New Wave. Mating the poet with the rocketeer. Bridging the two cultures.

Some of us fail, of course. We're only human. But I do think we try. I told you we were an idealistic bunch, didn't I? Dreamers from the first.

Meanwhile the field goes on. I think there is already a post Labor Day grouping visible, writers more commercial than we ever were, younger and newer and different, more like Campbell's stable than the Futurians since — unlike the Labor Day Group — they are tightly grouped around a single new magazine, in this case *Asimov's*. This newer bunch worries me a lot, perhaps the way the Labor Day writers worry Disch. I think they are too shallow, too facile, too careless of art. That may change, as they're still young, but it frightens me to realize that these are the children of the apathetic, hedonistic, cynical '70s, and that maybe they'll be the wave of the future.

Or maybe not. Maybe the future belongs to the Campbellians, or the surviving Futurians, or those mislabelled New Wavers ... or maybe to all of us.

But if I had to bet, I'd wager that the most exciting SF of the '80s and the '90s and maybe even the next century ... the novels that will thrill us and move us and teach us and stay with us so long as we live ... the stories that will break new ground and, yes, affirm that SF is part of literature in the highest and finest sense, that it is and should be *art* ... those novels and stories will be written by folks named Varley, and Bryant, and McIntyre, and Benford ... and maybe there will be one or two by me.

How do I react to being lumped with all these others in the Labor Day Group?, people have asked me. Well, Disch ends his essay by saying, "...for writers ... to frame a standard of excellence based on purely intramural criteria, and to make it their conscious goal to *win an award* is to confuse literature with bowling."

Among our other humble attributes, we in the Labor Day Group have a sense of humor.

We're having team bowling shirts made up for worldcon.

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Here is a totally fresh and superior time travel story from Carter Scholz, who tells us that he was born in Manhattan in 1953, attended Clarion, had work nominated for Hugo and Nebula awards, stories published in Orbit, Asimov's, Universe *and is currently working on a novel, a collaboration with Glenn Harcourt, titled PALIMPSESTS.*

Altamira

BY

CARTER SCHOLZ

for Glenn Harcourt — als ich chan

A susurrus of rain swept away all sound of traffic. Bernard Vogel stood by a large window slightly ajar in the Louvre, eyes shut for the moment, until a truck hissed by outside and broke his mood. He looked again at the *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* by Jan van Eyck. In the center of the canvas, between the upraised arms of the Chancellor and the Christ child, were two small figures leaning over a parapet, watching a river flow past, oblivious to the Virgin within venerated by Nicholas Rolin of the fifteenth century.

The two figures—nearly lost against a vista of houses, steeples, fields, hills, forest, and the opaque light of the sky — troubled Vogel. He could not make them fit. Peacocks walked the parapet. The Child had an aged face, and wore a jeweled cross on his breast. His genitalia were in shadow. Rolin, tonsured and pious, supplicated.

It was conventional for a donor to appear as priest or supplicant in the art of the day; the anachronism had been permissible because such scenes were said to be superterrestrial. But van Eyck's art defeated the convention. The rendering of Romanesque arches, a walled garden, and the river — certainly one of Liege and not of the New Jerusalem — was meticulous. The unit of space and time, coalesced in this perspective and light, placed the scene firmly in the real world, of bodies, weight, age, and enigmas resolved not by divine grace, but by human craft. *Als ich chan* — as best I can — was Jan van Eyck's motto and signature.

Vogel leaned closer. A guard scurried over and brushed him back.

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In a while the principals would rise and leave the studio, van Eyck would touch up, clean his brushes, varnish the panel. This was all the manipulation of materials. No hint of the elusive *Zeitgeist*.

Vogel was weary. He taught art history, and would continue to do so, said the board of governors of his college, only if a book was forthcoming. His fellowship and sabbatical were almost over, and he was no closer to his book's thesis than when he had flown out of Montana.

He was a good scholar, but he had grown a little dull with time. Like his friend Cole, he had started with Duchamp. Like Cole, his scholarship had drawn him back in time. Now his subject was the inconography of the Northern Renaissance; Cole specialized in the Venetian republic. But Cole at least had maintained a sense of art as art, distinct from art as cultural artifact; Cole would have had at least an inspired guess about the two figures.

He felt a brief pain and sat down. He shut his eyes so as to put his mind to rest, but instead it veered abruptly to the caves of Altamira. The young Picasso, 1902. The anthropologists had not known; for years they argued the authenticity of the line bison, but Picasso had known at a glance. They were his precursors. In *Guernica* he placed a Magdelenian bull; Cole once wrote on it.

If the continuity of art could stretch in such a grand way over twenty thousand years, what could Vogel hope to learn from his narrow scholarship? He longed for one glimpse at the heart of his subject. He lived a weak romance, the romance of temporal distance, the fiction that because we have memory the past is accessible. Van Eyck's mind, the motive force, was closed to him.

And yet there must be a memory past memory. Picasso had had it, to apprehend the life in the cave paintings.

He suddenly had a notion about the two figures and opened his eyes. The museum was gone.

First he was aware of a dusty light, yellow, spilling into the dim enclosure. Then he heard the rainy clucking of hens, and the deep moist snort of a horse. It was hot. He sat on a scratchy hay bale. From the gloom his eyes picked out the details of a barn. The dung scent enfolded him.

He had an appalling sensation of entrapment, as if he were dreaming through a false awakening. He rose and walked into bright brutal light, expecting Paris to crash back upon him in a moment. But outside was a deep still noon; fields stretched to the horizon. He walked until he reached a dirt road deeply marred by hoofprints. Haystacks stretched its flat length, spaced by a hundred meters or so. Far off, a single figure walked the road, and yielding to impulse, Vogel hid behind a haystack.

Waiting, he searched his pockets. He found four marks left over from

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Munich, seven guilder from Brussels, twenty-some francs in change, and more in paper, folded next two hundred dollars in traveler's checks.

The man walking was a monk, Dominican by his habit. As he passed, Vogel stepped out.

The monk stopped and raised his arms with a sigh. "Nothing ... twenty miles back...." was all Vogel could understand.

"Never mind, father," said Vogel in halting Dutch. "Can you tell me where I am?"

"What?"

"Where are we? Is this Holland?"

"This is the Bruges Road," said the monk, lowering his hands.

"Bruges?"

The monk sighed again. "Madman, thief, it's all one," he said in Latin.

"Father," said Vogel, struggling now with Latin, which he knew a little better than Dutch, "I may be a bit mad. Humor me. What place is this?"

The monk seemed to think that a madman speaking Latin might well be the Devil. He stepped back a pace and crossed himself. "Flanders."

"And the year."

The monk was now beside himself with fright. "Anno Domini 1425."

It seemed to Vogel his heart had shed a thick shell. He did not dare think. He was a few miles from the living van Eyck. The light changed, the light, of course, should have told him ... he took a breath as if he hadn't breathed in ten years.

"Dear God. Father, I, I ... thank you. You say you've been robbed, perhaps, here, take this...."

The monk's tentative hand touched an aluminum franc in Vogel's palm; then he jerked back as if burned. He went off down the road at a trot.

Vogel stood a moment, then shouted, laughed, and flung the handful of worthless coins into the air.

By the time he reached Bruges his ebullience was gone. He was broke, dirty, and very oddly dressed, he realized. After a few tries he found someone to listen to his modern Dutch and got directions to the ghetto. The man in the pawnshop eyed him suspiciously as Vogel explained he was a Spaniard, recently arrived in Bruges, just held up, and that his gold pocket watch, engraved *New Haven Conn*, was a recent Italian invention. The broker stared at him levelly and said a word in Hebrew. Vogel pretended not to understand.

He got ten florins on the gold. Vogel gave his name simply as Bernard, but the broker wrote on the ticket: *Bernard het Jood.* The depth of the insult did not reach him for a time.

Van Eyck's shop was well known, and Vogel spent two days in a market nearby, listening to conversations, observing manners and styles of dress. He had no more time than that because his money was running out. In his hostel at night he practiced the idiom and refined the story he meant to tell. He bought a cheap suit of workman's clothes.

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The artist was not in the shop when he arrived; he spoke with a companion. Vogel identified himself as Bernardus, of Spain, a journeyman applying for work; his features could pass him for a Spaniard, and there was much commerce between Flanders and Spain, but beyond that his story was implausible. The companion said Vogel seemed to be a fool and a liar, but they were short-handed since the shop's recent move from Lille, and if Vogel didn't do any damage, they would take him on for a pittance.

He was put to work mixing lacquer for van Eyck's temperas.

Nothing could have been more dull. Five years from the Ghent altarpiece, a year from the death of Jan's mysterious brother Hubert, present at the most critical moment in art history, the great change from tempera to oil as a medium, and he might as well have been sweeping floors in a Cistercian monastery. Even the joy of viewing unfinished van Eycks wore thin, since Jan would not permit apprentices in the shop when he worked, and Vogel could not stand half a minute at a panel without hearing:

"Back to work, you!"

After a month he could speak like a native, he was expert in purifying linseed and nut oils for varnish, and he had lost about ten pounds from the work. But the hundred questions he had for van Eyck died on his tongue; even the companions kept silence around the master. It occurred to Vogel he might be here a long time.

Eyck wanted a lacquer that did not need to be set in the sun to dry; his last panel had cracked from the heat. He asked Vogel to try some oil bases that might dry more readily. But still he showed no interest in trying out oil as a medium. Vogel was beside himself with frustration, and that night he entered the shop after the rest had left. He meant to experiment, not so much with the medium, as with his role in this time. Perhaps he was a catalyst. He would dabble with some oil-based paints, then spring the technique on van Eyck.

So he sat down before a primed wood panel and mixed the ground tempera pigments with linseed oil until he had a workable medium, and he began to paint.

Vogel had been a respectable draftsman in college, but he had not touched any medium for ten years. He was interested now in the science of oils, not the art of painting. But he became engrossed. The feel of the colors under the brush, the presence of sleeping Bruges outside, an almost tangible sense of time in the night air, moved him on. He painted.

Hours later he rose. In the street the watch cried two. His left calf was asleep. The painting he had made was not good, but he felt marvelous. He felt purged. A Madonna, the colors active and fine, the forms showing vestiges of Matisse over the medieval subject, some muddiness in the folds of the

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robe ... he stepped back for a fuller look, and stumbled into van Eyck standing behind him.

"You are like a demon, Bernard. It is after midnight, I see the lamp, I come in, and here is this fiend, arms flailing, painting a hellish picture. I stood for a good ten minutes watching you."

"I'm, I'm sorry."

"I see. The student is impatient."

Vogel felt deep shame and said nothing.

Van Eyck touched the wet picture and rubbed the color between two fingers while his eyes traversed the panel.

"You need an enormous amount of work. Which is more than I can say of some of my apprentices. And if you honestly like this sticky stuff you're using, there are finer ways to mix it."

"It's, it's a new medium."

"Hardly. Did you think so. There may be some hope for you. Tomorrow I'll put Ruggieri mixing the lacquers, and we'll begin to teach you how to draw. This we burn."

He picked up the panel with his dirtied hand and scaled it into a corner of the room.

First the paideuma of materials. Van Eyck did not let him lift a pencil for a month. Instead he read.

Accipe semen lini et exsicca illud in sartaigne super ignum sine aqua ... Omnia colores sive oleo sive gummi tritos in ligno ter debes ponere.... De oleo quomodo apatur ad distemperandum colores....

At times he was moved to protest.

"But I know this already."

"It won't hurt you to go over it."

"I...."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to ask about your brother Hubert," said Vogel. "I never see him around."

Van Eyck stared a moment, then broke out laughing. "Hubert! There is none. Everyone knows that. I invented him as a joke."

"A joke?" Vogel felt a sudden pain. He wondered about his presence here, if it was a presence. Trained in epistemology, he could not help wondering about observer and observed. This obviously was not the past he knew, since he was here. Yet it was similar. Plausibly he was inventing it as he went along, and he, Vogel, had somehow whisked Hubert van Eyck out of existence. He felt the weight of five hundred years on him.

Van Eyck came over and straddled a bench.

"It is so stupid," he said. "We are craftsmen, you see. They think of us like shoemakers. So I invented two names to sign on my work, just to go against this tradition of anonymity. And my own ducal motto! *Als ich chan:* meaning, to my patrons: I can, and you can't. Bernard, I encourage you, because I think you can understand this: if you become a master, sign your work. Let them know who you are. *We* are the true aristocrats of the age, you know.

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No, this was not a past Vogel could have invented; his modest Johannes, the admirable craftsman of *als ich chan*, had vanished more surely than the fictional Hubert. This man had an ego.

"We are the makers," said van Eyck sadly. "We see for them. And still they will not know me for a hundred years."

Then Vogel advanced to drawing, in silverpoint, and to backgrounds, in tempera. Van Eyck as teacher was the man he had imagined. In his curriculum was no ego, no recognition of genius. A painter made pictures from the products of earth, just as God had made man from clay. But pictures were base, without permanence; the media had inherent vice, that is, colors faded, lacquers flaked. The painter simply did the best he could, struggling as in his life he struggled against the taint of original sin, without conceited hope of heaven. Real gold in the gold leaf, not because the guild might check on it, but because purity of technique was a holy office.

"You know," said Vogel, "I think these oil colors will last longer than tempera."

Van Eyck smiled. "I know. I had the technique from an Italian. I've been thinking about it. We do things gradually in the north."

In 1430, Vogel became a master in the Guild of St. Luke; his masterwork was a tempera Luke. He had by now suppressed his logical mind, the five hundred years' weight, but he felt that to sign his true name, or invent another, would break the magic which had placed him here. So he signed it Bernardus Brugiensis, and he signed in a medium rich in inherent vice: a water-based pigment that would flake from the canvas within a hundred years and leave no trace of his passing, so he hoped. Only the art would remain: naturalism, technique, and piety, his trinity of craft.

The hand, it occurred to him, and not the eye, is the organ of time.

At best he could feel, regarding his work, a dim distant pride. But this was the pride of Bernard Vogel, art historian, and not of the man he was now. Having forgotten his original goal, he had moved very close to it.

He married into the Catholic Church. No more *Bernard het Jood*, no more Vogel, he found an authentic peace in the rituals. Receiving his First Holy Communion brought tears to his eyes, tears of joy and shame mixed; but not the shame of renouncing Vogel, who at his Bar Mitzvah was said to be a better cantor than the rabbi; the shame of being unworthy, of partaking in original sin. At confession he was sincere and tallied all his sins of spirit, since he had few of deed; yet he never once thought of confessing his origin to the priest. That origin was now a fairy tale to him, and the work of the Church, like his own, was real. He might to as little purpose trouble the

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priest with his dreams of nuclear holocaust, which plagued him still. He entered wholly into the spiritual paradigm of his new time.

In the circle of his patrons he was sometimes called the "Master of Bruges," which caused him to confess the sin of pride; since his aim was to vanish utterly into his art, he repudiated even this honor. There was in any case Eyck, and the young van der Weyden and Memling who were better masters than he. Eyck he revered, who had taught him that the materials, not the man, made the art.

He suffered the term *master* only from Kaatje, who called him that in whimsy, or sometimes "Bruges": her city. He noted that none of the variations of sex he had ever known gave him such a pure start of passion as when she shyly beckoned from her bedroom door late at night, as he finished his rounds of the house.

Van Eyck celebrated their marriage in the background of a picture he had under way. The primary models were Nicholas Rolin and Esther, a Jewess from the ghetto who often modeled as the Virgin. She was a slight, trim-breasted girl who could hold a pose for hours. Rolin was ostentatious, but he did not offend Vogel as he did van Eyck.

"That man," said Jan on occasion, "is destined for a particular hell." He was piqued, perhaps, at Rolin's habit of cutting off the sitting after an hour.

Bernard and Kaatje were in the background of the picture, leaning over the parapet of the bridge. The backdrop was a rich, naturalistic view of Liege that lifted Vogel's heart whenever he saw it. Into this landscape Eyck had placed the Bruges cathedral where they had married. Jan gave a laborious explanation of the iconography of the picture, explaining why he had shortened their figures to child-size, and so on. Vogel did not listen. He gazed at the picture and felt exalted, joyous beyond measure, beyond reason. Kaatje squeezed his hand. His happiness was complete.

"That idiot Rolin thinks it's the New Jerusalem," said Jan. "In fact, you two are the principals."

This struck Vogel as impious, but he could not censure Jan. He allowed genius its excesses.

He loved her. He thought of her while walking, while priming panels, while mixing pigments. A certain green naked on the palette recalled to him the shadow beneath her nose one noon as he watched her make lace; an umber, her breasts in the dark room; her rare ultramarine eyes.

She would never pose for him, which caused him some pain until he understood: she was for him alone. To represent was to diminish, and she would not be diminished for him. This he accepted.

He loved her so much that he was almost brought back to himself; that is, he wanted a child. Vogel himself was childless. His first wife in America

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had been nearly barren, and they had forced themselves into absurd postures, vainly, to get offspring. He remembered this as one remembers a complex dream. He could have repeated it with Kaatje, butt held high on the knee and elbow apex for minutes after insemination; but he would not. It took him a while to realize that this was perhaps time's insurance that he should not propagate his unnatural line. He was displaced. Art he had wanted, and art he surely had; but childless he would remain.

Then she sickened.

He, Bernard Vogel of the twentieth century, forced himself to watch the leechings, the purgings, the fruit of a thousand years of incestuous method and stupidity applied to his wife. She had influenza, and he knew it would deepen into pneumonia, and she would die. She was not yet thirty-five. He shared bread with a physician and watched as the doctor scored off a tiny bit of mold with the bread knife. Pneumonia. A trivial, silly disease, easily mastered by the slight *penicillium*. The doctor advocated, around his mouthful of bread, chewing one's food at least thirty times before swallowing. A student passed through the kitchen bearing a bowl of his wife's blood.

This was death, and since he had never known it first-hand in his old world, he was thrown bodily onto medieval custom. Some idiot of a patron gave him a hideous Latin manuscript titled *ars moriendi*, which he hid from Kaatje until a visiting priest discovered it. The deception Vogel had to confess, although the confession left his heart heavier than the sin had. He was obliged to join in the recitation of torments and temptations. The priest would not relent until his blameless love had confessed to every sin in the awful book. The lecherous old fool was even ready to insist that dying childless was a sin, unless he could bless the afflicted organ; then Vogel stood up, fists clenched, threatening to send him to a richly deserved hell of his own, then and there. The priest fled, shouting maledictions.

She died at three in the morning, her hands in his. Van der Weyden came by at noon and found Vogel sitting there still. He gently prised the cold stiff fingers from Vogel's. A bone snapped, and Vogel collapsed across the bed, weeping.

The year was 1444. That winter it was possible, late at night, to hear the distant crying of wolves outside the city. Stories trickled in from the countryside of snowbound towns besieged by wolves, of starvation and cannibalism. Vogel's sympathies were with the wolves. All winter he painted nothing. He took long walks through the ghetto. He passed Esther thrice without speaking. He went to the pawnshop where, twenty years past, he had left his watch and defiantly he dropped the pledge on the counter: *Bernard het*

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Jood, Aug MCCCCXXV. The same broker, now ancient, peered at him in wonder, and said politely, "But that is long since sold."

Not Vogel, then, nor Bernard Brugiensis, who was he? The very name of the town reminded him of Kaatje. He had vague forebodings; he thought that Eyck would soon die. He made plans to leave in the spring, saying he would go to see his parents in Spain and make pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. To raise money for the trip he began his last painting.

He thought to round his career with another Luke, after van der Weyden's splendid model; but he knew he could not depict Luke the painter without seeing himself, and he could not hide behind Luke's mask. So he tried something daring. He painted Esther as the Virgin, copying the Child from Eyck; and he placed himself prominently in the foreground. He sat, in the picture, at an angle, his back to the picture plane. The arrangement of pigments on the pictured table was as formal as a treatise on color. He did not sign this picture, but painted into an area smaller than a fingernail a distorted reflection of his own face, the face he had worn now for over fifty years, the face he had earned.

The week of his departure, van der Weyden came by.

"Eyck is dead."

He had not had a chance to say good-bye.

He left on the Paris-Bordeaux road, stopping at St. Martin in Tours, and at the end of three weeks' journey he was at Mass in St. Martial in Limoges. He intended to continue south without aim, into Spain, drawn by a force he could not name, when a single word overheard after the service drew him up short.

"Lascaux."

Five hundred years' history lived again in his mind. He was Vogel, the historian.

A couple of bourgeois on gentleman's pilgrimate to St. Martial. He learned from them it was no more than two days' ride to Lascaux. They invited him to join them in a night's carousal and on their journey home. Vogel said he would meet them at their hostel at cockcrow.

At the door to his hostel a crone was saying:

"Wanderers, ware St. Hubert. He rides with the dead for the souls of the living, waits at crossroads. Ware."

The gentlemen were late and a little disarrayed. Apparently still drunk, they blew kisses to their doxies of the night past, spilled luggage into the mud, and one neglected to fasten his saddle, which rolled him hilariously to the ground as he mounted.

"You're a monk," said the elder, more sober gentleman as they set off.

Vogel nodded.

"I'm surprised. Your brethren are usually the first to join us in these little nocturnal pilgrimages."

The other roared with laughter.

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The elder said severely, "You'll have a merry time explaining the state of your laundry to your wife."

"Oh, I'll say it's a new penance. Better than the hairshirt." This too amused him.

"*Toujours gai, Henri,*" said the elder to Vogel. "Why are you going to Lascaux?"

"I'm interested in the caves."

"Oh? That's a new one."

"I mean to spend some time there meditating.'

"You monks are odd fellows. But I don't judge. Someone has to look out for our souls, eh?"

"Yes. Someone must."

"I'll tell you, I've got a few of those caves on my land, and if it suits you, you can stay with me."

"I won't impose on you. I'll stay in the woods. But you wouldn't mind me poking around?"

"Not at all. And when you get bored with the caves, stop by the house and we'll share a Châteauneuf du Pape, eh?"

"Gladly."

Vogel did not believe in coincidence. Yet he knew the cave he wanted would be on this gentleman's property. It took him two weeks to find it. There was no wonder the interior had passed undiscovered until 1940: the entry was at the base of a sloping hill, almost covered by dirt. Vogel passed it thrice as a gopher hole. But once the dirt was cleared away, there was a sloping shaft a meter across.

From sharp noon light he crawled with his small oil lamp, down a tunnel forty or fifty yards long. He knew it led somewhere; there were echoes. It was terrible to have the earth press so close. Ten yards in he panicked and thought to back out and try again feet first. But he had not the courage. He shut his eyes for the rest of the course, and prayed the lamp would not go out, nor suffocate him.

His groping right hand clutched a bone.

Ahead was a ledge three feet deep, then infinite dark. A scatter of animal remains, some possibly human, littered the ledge. He peered over, holding the lamp out far. Perhaps he could make it down backwards. He twisted, spilling bones. Halfway down this sharper incline he slipped and turned his left ankle as he struck the slippery clay floor. By some miracle the lamp stayed alight.

The elk, the deer, the prancing ponies are there: the bison, cow, bear, ox, bull. The rhinoceros.

"The invention of seeing," whispered Vogel.

He wandered limping through the caves as if a tourist and not a man now twice displaced by time; even his thoughts were in American English, and he marveled that in his first life he had never come here. But he did not, breaking old habit, wish to know what the paintings meant; he was content to see.

Then an idea came to him, terrify-

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ing because his journey and hardships had brought it to him at such high cost. They were out of time, these beasts. Knowing, seeing, handling the crushed pigmented earth was all one to these artists. How in God's name approach these minds, unless —

"Exiles," he hissed.

Unless there were others like himself, exiled from their times, by choice, chance, or design, others who found their new world as horrible and full as he had, as if after a new birth. Their eyes filled, their souls stretched to breaking, they came here.

He found a palette the prehistoric painter had used, and nearby the mortar in which he ground his colors. Vogel handled it with awe and plumbed dust with a fingertip to find an ocher earth still stuck to the cup.

Here, and other caves like this, oh, throughout Europe, and Africa, out of the light of the ancient sun, hidden, they drew what they had seen, and what they knew, in the only language left them: line. Line was sight, and knowledge, and material, clay and spirit in one. They staggered then into the sun, fingers stained with colors, and knew not who they were, only that they had drawn gods, or seen gods, or been as gods, and would again.

He put down his lamp and moved so as not to throw his shadow on the figures he studied.

He reached the end of a gallery with eyes raised and turned in to a small apse. He did not see the shaft. He stepped off with his right foot, and as his balance directed all his weight back onto his left, it gave beneath him. He fell, and heard the crack of bone as he landed.

The bird-headed shaman lies prostrate, entranced, a live bird perched on his staff. Nearby a bull is transfixed by a spear passing through anus and penis.

This Vogel saw painted on the shaft. This he had come for: time, transfixed by craft, a spear running from hole to hole, from conception to the pit. His lamp sputtered. This time death claimed Vogel permanently.

Guy Cole went to find Vogel and failed. He spent two weeks of his vacation making inquiries in Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam.

In the Rijksmuseum he was checking details for his forthcoming book when he encountered a picture he had never seen before. It was attributed to "school of van Eyck (Joos van Ghent?), 1444." An artist before a canvas faced away from the viewer, towards two models posed in an adoration scene. A haloed infant appeared on the canvas, though none was in the studio. The artist's hand was about to touch a jar of pigment. The tools of his trade had been rendered with precision.

The date was somewhat early for the imagery. Cole stepped closer and

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was excited to find a second depiction of the artist, in a convex mirror at the rear of the studio. He peered at the distorted face in the mirror from a favorable angle: the calm unmistakable face of Bernard Vogel, greatly aged, peered back. On the mirror's frame, the motto: *als ich chan.*

Guy Cole's *The Painter's Place in Netherlandish Culture* was published in April. At the last moment he replaced the frontispiece, Vermeer's *Art of Painting,* with *Painting of an Adoration* by an unknown Dutchman. The facing inscription, deleted in the second edition, read:

D.M.
FAVTI MAGISTRI
BERNARD VOGEL
OBIT. A.D. MCDXLIV

Cole never knew how close he had come, how wrong he was.

---

the martians have landed . . .

In Grover's Mill, New Jersey. That was the claim made by Orson Wells in his radio adaptation of H.G. Wells book *War of the Worlds.* There really is a Grover's Mill and you can own a sample of soil actually taken from the community. You will also receive a Certificate of Authenticity signed by the

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Here is a brand new adventure of Max Kearny, occult investigator. The plot, Ron Goulart says, grew out of seeing numerous possessed house movies and wondering why one particular house always got it. A whole neighborhood of 'em seemed like an interesting possibility.

The Return of Max Kearny

BY
RON GOULART

At just a minute short of midnight the bathtub started screaming again.

On his side of the fourposter the big, bear-shaped man clenched his paw-like fists and feigned deep untroubled sleep. On the opposite side his lovely blonde wife sat bolt upright, her frilly diminutive nightie twisting around her smooth body, and gave him a punch in the kidneys.

"Oh, shoot. There it is all over again," said Tinkle Snowden. The moonlight knifing into the second-floor bedroom made her deeply tan skin shimmer in a highly provocative way.

Still huddled in one of his hibernating poses, Boswell Snowden bit his tongue and waited for the pain in his lower back to subside.

"This is really gross, Boz," said Tinkle, full lips next to his shaggy ear. "A bathtub that wails like a banshee is ... gross."

"Hum?" He faked a mumbled yawn.

"What sort of impression must we be making on the other people who live here in Hollow Hills Circle?" She placed an icy hand on his naked shoulder. "Our bathtub screams, our furnace chuckles like a madman, our ... what the heck is that?"

Down the hall the toilet had begun yodeling.

"Houses makes noises at night," said Snowden.

Tinkle said, "It's not just noises, Boz, as you know darn well."

"You're not used to being on the ground so much," suggested her husband, trying not to hear the awesome noises rolling down the hall from the bathroom.

"Well, no, I never heard a biffy yo-

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deling when I was a flight attendant for TransAm Airways, no." She swung one long handsome leg over the bed edge. "I'm going to march right down to the john and —"

"Listen, some things you ought not to fool with, hon."

"No darn bathtub's going to spoil my ... oh, ugh!"

He lumbered into a sitting position. "What now?"

"I just stepped in something horrible and slimy. It's all over the bed chamber floor," his wife said. "Oh, how gross ... it's blood. Our lovely rug's awash with blood, Boz."

"Probably only a leaking faucet." He elbowed over to Tinkle's side of the bed to stare down at the dark floor.

"What sort of faucet would leak blood?"

"Moonlight plays strange tricks on your eyes," suggested Snowden, striving to put a soothing note into his rumbling voice. "That stuff looks more like chocolate than blood to me anyway."

"Well, it's not fun putting your bare foot down in lukewarm chocolate either," she said. "And where'd gallons of it come leaking from?"

"Oh, there has to be a simple explanation."

"Heck, that's what you always say," she complained, making a tentative swipe at her toes with her forefinger. "One would think, Boz, that you, of all people, the nation's leading author of supernatural fiction would—"

"Tim not exactly the leading writer of weird stuff," he corrected. "There are three guys ahead of me."

"But *Curse of the Demon* has been number nine on the darn *New York Times* list for weeks and weeks."

"Meaning eight books are ahead of us."

"But it's been optioned by Mecca-Universal for a six-figure advance," persisted Tinkle. "On top of which you're dead sure to win the Grisly Award from the Occult Writers of America at the banquet at the Biltmore in New York City next—"

"That's Ghastly, not Grisly."

"Well, grisly or ghastly, you ought to believe in a real occult phenomenon when it happens right smack ... darn, that is so blood." She'd clicked on her frill-shaded bedside lamp.

Her fingertip was red-smeared. The bedroom carpet, usually a sedate buff color, was now a soggy crimson across most of its four hundred square feet.

"Aw, looks more like rusty water to me."

"Rusty water? You could use this stuff to give sick people transfusions, Boz," his wife said. "I'd like to see you phone up Burt Nostradamus the plumber and tell him you've got twenty gallons or so of blood spilled on the rug and you think a rusty faucet did—"

"We won't be using Nostradamus anymore."

"Simply because he wanted to interview you?" Tinkle continued to study her fingertip. "Personally I think

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it's darn admirable that he doesn't want to be a plumber all his life and aspires to become a writer of—"

"Your average plumber in this part of Connecticut makes more money than 97 percent of the freelance writers in the country," said Snowden. "Furthermore, Nostradamus writes for the *National Intruder*, which ain't my idea of the main current in American—"

"It'd be nice publicity for you, Boz."

"Sure, *Crazed Author Plagued by Real Life Horrors!* I don't need that sort of publicity, honey."

"Before you had this fantastic success with *Curse of the Demon*, Boz, before you'd gotten that $100,000 advance from Usher House Books for the hardcover and the $230,000 from Midget Books for the paperback, before we'd met when you took that TransAm flight out to Hollywood to talk turkey with the movie moguls, back then you'd have jumped at—"

"Exactly. Now I don't need cheap publicity. Turn off the damn light."

"The bathtub is still screaming. Boz, this has been happening almost every night for the past three weeks," persisted Tinkle. "This house has to be haunted or possessed. I bet it's the site of a long-forgotten murder."

"This house is not even a year old."

"You absolutely have to find out what is wrong, what evil force holds our house in its sway."

"Ignore it," he advised, rubbing at his beard and then pretending to assume a ready-to-sleep position.

"You keep saying that and it keeps getting worse. First it was only an occasional maniacal laugh in the middle of the night or a few drops of blood forming on a wall." She paused to take a breath. "The whole dreadful process is accelerating. I really believe this horrible house wants to drive me goofy, the same way the mansion in *Curse of the Demon* did to poor Alice."

"Alicia," he corrected.

"Well, whatever. It's a silly name for a girl. Boz, maybe we ought to move before the house destroys—"

"I've been writing professionally for eleven years, Tinkle," he said, rising up on one shaggy elbow. "I'm nearly thirty-eight and this is my first real taste of success. This damn house represents something to me, a goal I've reached. No one is going to take it away or scare me into ... never mind. Let's go to sleep."

"What do you mean no one? Do you know what's behind these ghostly manifestations?"

He waited a few seconds before answering, "No."

The screaming was waning, growing weak. So was the yodeling.

"What about the blood?" asked Tinkle.

"It'll be gone by morning."

She punched him in the side. "See? You *do* believe it's supernatural. Real blood wouldn't possibly go away just—"

"If you're not in the mood for going to sleep, what say we make love?"

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"With the house full of demons and goblins and lord knows what else?" Shivering, Tinkle folded her arms across her breasts.

Her husband turned his massive back on her, soon began producing snoring sounds.

"I think we're not the only ones," Tinkle said after a moment.

"What?"

"Not the only ones with a haunted house. Nobody's said anything directly to me, yet I suspect ... well, it's possible all the houses in the circle are haunted," she replied. "Isn't that a really gross possibility? Something really terrible must've happened here a long time ago."

"More recently than that," murmured Snowden into his pillow.

The smell of sulfur awakened Max Kearny seconds before his bedside clock commenced bonging in impossibly loud and sepulchral tones. The brimstone scent was a familiar, though not recently experienced one. Wide awake, he hopped out of bed and made his way across the unfamiliar moonlit room. As he reached his trousers on the wicker armchair where he'd tossed them, an unearthly wailing came drifting up from the patio below.

Pants in hand, Max sprinted to a window.

There was a dark figure crouched next to the barbecue pit. Ducked low, it went scurrying away into the shadowy brush beyond the flagstones.

Max narrowed one eye. Turning away from the window, he tugged his pants on. "I think I see the real reason I'm a house guest," he said to himself. He shed the pajama top he'd been sleeping in, pulled on a rugby shirt and moved to the doorway.

He was a middle-sized man, slim and forty-one. He wore his grey-spattered black hair in a sort of shaggy crewcut.

Three steps into the upstairs hall and he stepped in something warm and slick, went sliding and skidding.

He hit the balustrade, teetered on the brink of plummeting over into the yawning stairwell. Saving himself, he pushed back and stopped when he was leaning against the wall.

"That you out there, Max?" called a female voice.

"Yeah, it is." He wiped two fingers across his bare sole. "So you can come on out."

The other bedroom door opened and a plump red-haired woman in a terry robe peered out. "Can't sleep, huh?"

A thin-faced man, his sandy blond hair sleep-tousled, looked out over the redhead. "Nightmare, Max?"

Inspecting his fingers, Max said, "Blood."

"Wake up," urged the red-haired woman, "you're still dream—"

"C'mon, Nita," said Max as he wiped his hand on a pocket tissue. "I don't mind being conned now and

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then, but it can cease now."

"Sometimes when you mix pills and booze," suggested Nita McNulty, eyes not meeting his, "it causes ... oh, hell, we do love you, Max, and we're sorry Jillian didn't come East with you on this trip. And we're happy you're our house guest while your advertising work keeps you back here."

"You're one of our favorite California people," picked up her husband, "and I miss you more than almost any other friend we left out there when we moved to Connecticut six years ago and I went to work for *Muck* magazine."

"But?" supplied Max.

"Let's go downstairs into the living room," suggested Nita. "I'll brew a pot of coffee and ... oh, you're into herb teas now, aren't you."

"I can forgo beverages of any kind, if you give me an explanation."

"Downstairs," said Gil McNulty, coming out into the hallway and taking hold of Max's arm. "Safer ... that is, easier to chat down there."

"Watch out," warned his wife. "Don't step in the blood."

"Ah, so you folks do see it, too."

Wrapping her yellow robe more tightly around her wide body, Nita led the way down the stairs.

Before any of them reached the ground floor, the upstairs toilet started yodeling.

Max was the only one who flinched. Noticing, he asked, "This happens regularly?"

"Most nights," answered Gil, yawning. He'd pulled khaki slacks on over his paisley pajamas, giving himself makeshift anklets. "Around midnight or thereabouts."

"We're, sort of, used to it."

When they were settled in the living room, Gil said, "We would've invited you out for this weekend anyway, Max."

"Sure, I know." He glanced up at the ceiling.

A glistening black patch was forming on the white plaster, some thick black liquid was oozing through.

"The houses here in Hollow Hills Circle are all good houses, well-built, all ten of them." Nita was watching the growing black puddle. "Working for the Hollow Hills Realty Agency I could be a mite prejudiced, since I have to sell them. But, honestly, Max, there is nothing technically wrong with any of the ten. What's been happening isn't due to shoddy materials or faulty construction."

"No, that wouldn't account for blood-curdling wails and corridors of blood," he said, remembering to sip his peppermint tea.

"I told you he'd be sympathetic," said Gil across to his wife.

Nita held her mug of coffee tightly in both plump freckled hands. "Part of the problem, Max, is my being responsible for the selling of the particular houses. They go for $200,000, which is a damn good price for this part of Connecticut. Little over an hour from New

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York City, really wonderful shopping mall only a few minutes downhill, brand-new middle school and a whole new high school complex planned for—"

"Spiel," mentioned her husband.

"Yes, I'm sorry. Anyhow, Max, I have four more yet to sell. That's $800,000 worth of houses and my commission will be ... quite nice."

"But something is wrong with one of the houses, with this one?"

Gil bave a bitter laught. "If it were only this one."

Sitting up and putting his cup on the glass coffee table, Max said, "You mean people are experiencing similar stuff in other house in the circle?"

"In all of them," Nita replied, staring sadly into her coffee.

The black splotch in the ceiling began to drip.

Max rose, crossed to where the drops were hitting the rug and probed with a finger. "Some kind of foul-smelling sludge."

"It always disappears in an hour or two," said Gil.

"How long has all this been going on?"

"Nearly three weeks," answered Gil. "At first there were only small things. Odd gurgles from the pipes, modest little drippings. We had our friend Burt Nostradamus the plumber in to check out most of the early complaints. Thing is, it's been growing increasingly worse. Now we also get screams, wails and howlings."

"Blood dripping in big puddles, toilets glowing in the dark, little fuzzy creatures lurking under tables.... Oh, Max, you must realize how awful things like this will affect the property values."

"Every single resident of the circle has complained?"

"That's right, every ... well, no," said Nita, thoughtful. "For some reason the Snowdens haven't uttered a negative word. Which is odd, considering."

"He's Boswell Snowden," added Gil.

Max said, "Guy who wrote *Curse of the Demon*?"

"The same," replied his friend. "This ought to be right up his alley, but he and his nifty ... well, she is pretty attractive, Nita, don't scowl ... he and his wife are acting as though nothing is wrong."

"Acting?"

"I've done a couple of midnight prowls," said Gil, "while the ... manifestations were in full swing. I'm just about certain every damn house in Hollow Hills Circle is suffering from the same sort of haunting or whatever. That includes the Snowden place as well as the homes Nita hasn't even sold yet."

"I'll never sell them," she sighed. "The poor people I conned into buying into this beautiful spot are barely speaking to me now; we all know if something isn't done soon, some of them will try to unload. For a lot less than they paid."

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"So far, to anticipate your next possible question, Max, we haven't gone to the local cops," Gil told him. "Because, frankly, I don't see any way this could be a prank or vandalism. We could maybe ask some sort of environmental agency to come in and make a study, except this is unlike any contamination I've ever investigated. And on *Muck* I've investigated plenty of cases."

"Nobody else has gone for outside help?" Max tried his tea again.

"The Snowdens won't admit they're being tormented; the Milmans are away in Europe and have been since before this mess started," explained Nita. "As for the rest of them, the Steffansons, the Silvas and the Sanhammels, they—"

"All afraid," took up Gil. "See, they don't want to be laughed at or have the circle turn into a damn tourist attraction. Besides which, should word get around this area's contaminated by spooks or devils or whatever, well, Nita's right ... the property values'd plummet, Max. The housing market is lousy enough without adding a supernatural element."

"You can't keep something like this quiet forever, though," said Nita. "little rumors are already leaking, and if something isn't done soon, darn soon, it could really turn out terrible for all of us."

"When you phoned that you were in New York to supervise the filming of some commercials for ... what was the product?"

"*Slurp!*," he replied. "Instant soup in a plastic mug. Our slogan is, 'I'd rather *Slurp!* than eat!' Which brings me to an important point, folks. I am, in real everyday life, a full-fledged advertising person. When we were all chums out in San Francisco years back, I worked for someone else. The past four years and more, I've been president of Kearny & Associates, with an annual billing of $27,000,000. Jillian and I, along with Stephanie, live a fairly affluent life in the wilds of Marin County, and so .. well, I haven't done any occult detective work for years. Far as that's concerned, I'm retired."

"You did such brilliant work," said Gil. "I was always writing your exploits up when I was with the *Chronicle*. That invisible antiporn group and the guy with the haunted TV set and the lycanthrope who turned into an elephant on national holidays and the suburban gnome who—"

"Decade and more ago," reminded Max as he stood.

The black spot was fading, the toilet had grown silent.

"If this whole area goes under, it'll be awful," said Nita. "Not just because of the financial thing, but because of the brave families who've settled here, Max, put down roots, fought against all sorts of—"

"C'mon, you make us sound like something out of a John Jakes saga," said her husband. "Really, though, Max, we'd appreciate some help from you."

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He was gazing out at the moonlit front acre. Turning to face his old friends, Max said, "Okay, I'll come out of retirement."

Gil said, "Great!"

"You're lovely," said Nita, coming over to hug him.

"For a couple days anyway," he added.

The young woman on the 10-speed bicycle said, "You're Max Kearny."

Nodding, Max kept on running. "And you're a neighbor of the McNultys."

The dark blonde said, settling into a speed which kept her beside him on the early-morning lane, "I'm Kate Tillman, my husband is Bronco Sanhammel."

"Used to play ... football, didn't he?"

"That's him," she said. "Reason I'm Tillman and he's Sanhammel is I believe a woman ought to maintain her identity in marriage. Bronco doesn't exactly agree, but he's too busy at Malfunctions to argue."

"What sort of malfunctions?"

"No, it's the name of a company, Malfunction Studies International. A research organization based over in Stamford. They study companies and institutions and explain why they're screwed up. Lots of clients these days. Your wife didn't hold on to her own name."

"No, she foolishly abandoned it years ago. How'd you know?"

"Read a frothy piece on you two in *People* last year. Do you find advertising a compromising trade?"

"A compromise with starvation." As far as Max could recall, the half page of copy in *People* hadn't mentioned his one-time ghost-breaking sideline. "I'd like to come over and talk to you and your husband sometime today. A sort of research thing I'm—"

"Bronco's in Ethiopia," Kate told him. "Looking into a donut factory that's been turning them out square instead of round. We're both individuals, though, and I can talk to you while he's away. Do you always wheeze like this when you jog?"

"Only on the fifth and final mile," Max admitted.

The young woman was frowning, studying him out of the corner of her eyes. "How old are you?"

"Forty-one."

"That explains it, I'm twenty-nine. We come from different generations."

"Is that still going around, generation gap?"

Kate's frown deepened. "I'm trying to remember something else about you. Something from when I was a kid."

"Way back in the dim and distant sixties?"

Her head bobbed in affirmation. "It was in some strange and sleazy magazine Uncle Alfie used to get.... Right! You were a ghost detective, an occult investigator."

"According to Nita and Gil, I still am."

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Downhill loomed the landscaped entryway to Hollow Hills Circle.

"Then I very much do want to talk to you, Max," she said. "You don't mind if I call you Max right off?"

"I expect such familiarity from your generation."

"You're teasing but I'm serious," she said. "Why don't you drop in for breakfast now? I'm a vegetarian, so I can't offer you ham and sausage or any other dreadful traditional Sunday breakfast fare. We can talk, though about...."

"About what?"

"The hauntings."

Max sat on the brick front porch of the Tillman-Sanhammel colonial, watching a carrion crow circle a nearby wooded area and aware of various thumpings coming from inside the house. A scruffy terrier cut across the vast front lawn, pausing to gruff once at him.

"Okay, all shipshape. You can come on in," invited Kate from the now open front door.

Stretching up, his left knee making a creaking, Max went into the cool, spotless living room, which was furnished with stark functional furniture and tropical plants. There were book cases built into one wall, and he noticed, while following her through to the kitchen, a gap of about two feet on the otherwise crowded shelves. "How long have you lived here?"

"I suppose that was an old-fashioned stereotyped female thing to do," said Kate over her shoulder. "Tidying up before letting you in."

"Warms the heart of us senior citizens."

The kitchen was yellow, black and white, as angularly furnished as the living room.

Nodding at a square yellow table, Kate said, "What were you asking, Max?"

"How long you and Bronco have lived here in Hollow Hills."

"Oh, just a bit over two months," she said. "Before that we had a place over in Weston, but when Bronco got promoted to Assistant Foul-Up Field Research Man, we decided to move up the ladder a rung or two. Not that I'm into status."

"Did you hear about this area through someone?"

She placed a glass teakettle on an electric burner of the stark black stove. "Rose hip or Red Zinger tea?"

"Dealer's choice."

Kate reached up and took a box of rose hip tea from a cabinet shelf. Her navy-blue jersey hiked, showing a smooth stretch of tan back. "Matter of fact, we knew some of the people who were already living here," she said, busying herself with getting out two teabags and dropping them into a fat black teapot. "Actually I knew Boz Snowden and he'd spoken highly of Hollow Hills Circle."

"You're friends of the Snowdens?"

"Not exactly, I used to be Boz's typ-

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ist." She turned, leaned against a counter. "He had a small place in Weston, too, before the tremendous success of *Curse of the Demon*."

"You type the manuscript on that?"

Kate lifted the whistling kettle off the heat. "Yes, a good part of it," she answered as she poured steaming water into the teapot. "How do soy pancakes sound? As the main course? Along with hashbrown rutabagas?"

"Yum-yum."

"I suppose, depending on the mass food business for your livelihood, you have to pretend to enjoy eating garbage."

"It's required, yes. Garbage, sewage, all sorts of other unspeakable stuff. That's what they pay me for." He took the cup of tea she handed him. "You ready now to talk about the unusual things that've been going on hereabouts?"

Bending from the waist, bare back flashing again, she took a black mixing bowl from a low shelf. "Everyone has been bothered by strange things, Max, all the houses," Kate said. "Strange noises during the witching hour, occult manifestations, ghostly materializations."

"What do you think causes it all?"

She faced him again, bowl clutched to her chest. "I haven't done as much digging into local history as I'd like," she said. "I do know, though, that centuries ago there was some kind of devil-worshipping cult that flourished in these parts, Max. It seems most likely that what we're experiencing is some sort of residual evil, a kind of supernatural toxic waste that's built up."

"What do you and your husband intend to do?"

Kate fetched two eggs from the squat yellow refrigerator. "Oh, Bronco isn't here enough to be much bothered. And, as you may recall, when he played pro ball they dubbed him the Salinas Stoic." She broke two eggs into the bowl. "Gibbering bathtubs and blood dripping from doorknobs doesn't much faze him. I guess we'll just sit it out. Sometimes, from what I've heard, these ghostly things end as suddenly as they began."

"In Boz Snowden's book it took two cardinals, a bishop and a psychic investigator to exorcise the demon who'd been dwelling in that old mansion on the Long Island Sound."

Kate sniffed. "That's fiction, Max." Picking up a mixing a spoon, she began working on the contents of the bowl.

The white wallphone rang.

She caught it on the second ring. "Yes?" Kate paused, listening. "I can't talk to you now.... It doesn't sound as though you have anything new to say to me anyway.... Oh, really? I ... I'll phone you later." She hung up carefully. "Relatives, even distant ones, can be a pain."

Max eased to his feet. "Can I wash up someplace before breakfast?"

"Downstairs bathroom's through the living room and along the hall on your right."

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"Thanks." On his way there, Max stopped in the stark living room to take a look at the gap on the book shelf.

Shaved, showered and wearing old tennis shoes and denim slacks, Max cut across a grassy acre between the houses which ringed, informally, the circle. The sun was nearly at its midday mark in the clear blue sky.

On the close-cropped lawn directly in front of the Snowden house a long, tanned young woman in a fawn-colored bikini was spread-eagled on an air-cushion. Near her fluffy blonde head a tiny transistor radio was gurgling.

At the sound of Max's sneaker on the gravel path leading to the front door, the blonde sat up. "Are you coming over to complain?"

He shook his head. "I'm Max Kearny, staying with the McNultys for a few—"

"Boz, my gifted husband, is very class-conscious. He's got the dopey notion sunbathing annoys people and that I ought to do it out back in the privacy of our patio, except the sun's better out front this time of day. It isn't, besides, that I'm mother naked or indecent. He's Boswell Snowden, author of *Curse of the Demon*. It's a best seller."

"I know." Max approached Tinkle Snowden across the bright grass. "Reason I dropped over, Nita McNulty, in her capacity as a real estate agent, has asked me to check out some complaints she's been getting. Always anxious to keep all the residents of the circle as content as—"

"Complaints, maybe, about spooky noises?"

Halting, Max squatted at the edge of the polka-dot air mattress. "Have you been suffering from such disturbances, Mrs. Snowden?"

"...climbing right up to the top of the charts, baby..." murmured the tiny radio.

"I guess you could say so. I mean, golly, the bathtub screams like a hooty owl, the toilet sounds like there's a fat man drowning in it, and ... well, well, and how do you like Connecticut, Mr. Kearny?"

"Hum?"

"Nix, nix." She hunched one bare shoulder at her colonial-style house, then whispered, "The electric typewriter's stopped clacking. He's probably watching us. From his studio."

"Does he read lips?"

"Boz has a wide range of unusual talents. I don't know, but he doesn't want me to admit we've been having any trouble with our house."

"Does he now? I'd have thought, since this is exactly the sort of thing he writes about in his novels, that he'd be eager to—"

"Heyo!" The front door flapped open, and while it was still quivering, the huge bearded Snowden emerged to stand squinting on the front porch. "What are you selling, buddy?"

"*Slurp!*" called Max. "But not to

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you. I'm a guest of the McNultys. Nita's asked me to—"

"No comment." Snowden came lumbering down across the lawn, a ballpoint pen gripped between his teeth.

"Nita's very anxious to make certain the folks residing here are trouble-free and—"

"No comment," replied the bear-like author. "I can emphasize that with a poke in the snoot."

"Boz, don't beat up Mr. Kearny." Tinkle hopped up. "He's much dinkier than you."

"Kearny? Kearny? I read about you someplace, saw a picture."

"No doubt in *People*. About my wife and me, and my advertising agency."

"Naw, this was when I was a kid and first got hooked on the supernatural...." His thick shaggy eyebrows tilted toward each other. "Yeah, you used to be a ghost breaker, a demon buster, an occult busybody."

"In my vanished youth," said Max. "Right now I'm just doing Nita a favor by—"

"We have nothing to say, Kearny." Snowden raised a shaggy fist.

"But, Boz, maybe we ought to—"

"Shut your yap," advised her husband.

"If you are suffering from any sort of occult manifestations, the publicity from that could only help your—"

"You're going to suffer from a busted snoz if you don't haul ass out of here."

"Really?" Max remained facing the larger man.

After a second Snowden dropped his fist. "Tinkle's right, I can't smack a wimp like you."

Grinning at them, Max said, "If either of you change your mind, I'm staying at the McNultys through Tuesday." He walked away.

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Kearny," called Tinkle.

Max leaned his elbows on the metal patio table, studying the notes he'd scribbled on the pages of a yellow legal tablet after talking with all the beleaguered residents of the circle, shuffling through the maps and floorplans Nita'd provided. "Demonic possession ... some sort of residual evil ... an unsolved murder in the past ... none of the above?"

Pipes and wrenches rattled. "Courting the muse?"

Glancing up, Max beheld a man in a tan suit at the edge of the flagstone patio, a tool chest dangling in one hand. "You must be Burt Nostradamus," he said, pushing back in his deck chair.

Nostradamus was tall and lean, wearing dark glasses. "The village plumber." He came over and sat opposite Max unbidden. "Yet in my heart dwell deeper yearnings."

"Toward me?"

"I'm alluding to my dream of being some day a full-time professional writer," the plumber explained. "The ambi-

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tion first struck me one chill winter's eve some years since while I labored to unearth the frozen pipe leading to the Hungerford's cesspool. Flurries of snow assailed my slim frame, making white smudges across the black slate of the night. 'Nostradamus,' I exclaimed at that moment of insight, 'there is more to life than dibbing into cesspools in the middle of the night.' From that day I was dedicated to becoming an author.

"How've you been doing?"

"Thus far I've sold seven articles to the *National Intruder*," the plumber said, smiling faintly with pride. "I know I could get a full page in there if only Boz Snowden would cooperate."

"You want to interview him?"

"This yarn is big enough to hit maybe even the wire services. If, that is, I can persuade Snowden to speak frankly and openly with me."

"This all has something to do with the strange midnight happenings?"

The gaunt plumber dropped his toolkit with a thunking rattle. "I know of your work in the field of occult investigation, Mr. Kearny," he said in a confiding tone. "When I was but a small lad I read of your daring exploits in the very pages of the *Intruder*. Little did I dream that some fine day my own work would be gracing those selfsame pages, or that I'd meet such a—"

"You're around the Circle a lot, aren't you?"

"More than some realize," replied the plumber. "In the interest of gathering material, I've been paying nocturnal visits. Indeed, I was here last night when the demonic manifestations occurred. Perhaps you noticed me, being more perceptive than the rest, as I moved hither and yon on the track of the unknown."

"Were you out here on the patio?"

Nostradamus nodded. "It's risky being out in the open when this devilish work is going on, yet for a story—"

"What about the empty house two houses to the left of us? You been in there?"

Shaking his head, the plumber said, "Not since we installed the plumbing some time since. Why? You don't think a fellow occult investigator would stoop to housebreaking on the side."

Max said, "What's your theory as to what's behind this all?"

"Boswell Snowden's novel is a runaway best seller, yet he writes little better than I do," said the plumber. "His earlier novels, all of which I've read, are much worse even. Poorly plotted, filled with trite conventionalities and stilted prose. They did not sell."

"*Curse of the Demon* is pretty well written."

"The explanation is childishly simple, Mr. Kearny," said Nostradamus, leaning. "In order to insure himself a better prose style and to guarantee impressive sales, I am certain what Snowden did. He did what greedy and ambitious men have done through the ages, entered into a pact with the devil."

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"You have any proof?"

"Nothing concrete, no," admitted the gaunt plumber. "Yet, from all I've seen and heard here during the grim watches of the night, I know I am right. As soon as I can prove my case, then have I got a story for the *Intruder*."

"What about all the things that are happening to the other houses?"

"Side effects," said the plumber, sitting back.

Phone on his lap and receiver to his ear, Max sat alone in the McNulty living room and watched the twilight come sweeping slowly across Hollow Hills Circle.

"Hello?"

"We have a collect call from the Bowery, New York," he said. "A Mr. Maxwell Kearny, Jr. claims, as far as we can make out from his babbling, that he is your common-law spouse. Will you accept charges?"

"Oh, him. No, toss him back into his gutter and mention I'm on the brink of running away with the college boy who seeds the lawn."

Max said, "Otherwise how are things, Jill?"

Jillian Kearny said, "Stephanie got a homer and a double today."

"Admirable. Is she still the only girl in the Little League?"

"The only one on the Mill Valley Brewers. She's out at practice this very moment, so you can't talk to her. Did you buy her something?"

"It's in my suitcase."

"How are Nita and—"

"Listen, Jill, there's something going on here."

"Such as?"

He told her.

When he'd concluded she asked, "What's this Kate Tillman look like?"

'Oh, your usual long-legged blonde, beautiful and highly intelligent. Just like most wives in Fairfield County," he answered. "Little dinky auburn-haired ladies in their waning thirties they turn back at the border."

Jillian said, "You're investigating this whole frumus, huh?"

"Apparently so."

"Couldn't stay retired."

"Nope."

"So what do you think is afoot?"

"Somebody's summoned up a demon," he said. "All the manifestations point to that."

"Sounds like, yes," she agreed. "Which prompts me to suggest you go easy, Max."

Pushing aside the three library books on the coffee table, he moved the legal tablet into writing range. "Listen, Jill, all of my occult reference books and manuscripts are still up in the attic, aren't they?"

"I bumped into them only last night when I was hunting for Stephanie's bingo game, which she had a sudden wild urge to play."

"Can you pop up there and copy off a few of the strongest spells for getting rid of a demon?"

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"Sure. Are we talking about a demon summoned to aid somebody?"

"No," he said, "one brought forth to get revenge."

A soft night rain was falling. Max zipped up his windbreaker, went edging along beside the McNulty house. He carried an unlit flashlight in his hand.

He waited in the bushes, watching the empty, rain-slick road which curved around the circle. After a few damp moments, he jogged across a slanting lawn, ran along a white driveway and, slowing, approached one of the unoccupied houses.

Moving along close to the side of the house, he halted near the window of the den. As he'd anticipated, there was a flickering light inside.

His watch face wasn't in the mood to glow, so he had to squint to make out the time. Three minutes in front of midnight.

He crept around to the rear of the house, let himself in by way of the kitchen door he'd left open during his afternoon visit.

The part of the house he'd entered still smelled of fresh paint and new wood. As he walked, silently, toward the den, though, new odors hit him. The smells of brimstone, sweet strong incense, damp earth, decay. Not your usual suburban household scents.

The whole house began to shudder.

Windows rattled, floors creaked.

It was like being directly over a quake.

From the den came a woman's voice. "You've got to go back!"

There was a rumbling, rasping laugh. "The gate has been opened! I am unleashed."

"Yes, but you were only supposed to do one simple thing and then go back ... home."

Again the awful booming laughter.

All the pipes in the empty house began to shriek. Strange gurglings commenced underfoot. All the toilets were chortling.

"You haven't even succeeded in doing what I summoned you for. You've been making all sorts of annoying trouble for innocent people. It's stubborn and ... mean-minded."

"You should have reckoned on that when you allowed Morax into this world again."

"I looked up another new spell, and this one'll bottle you up again."

Another evil laugh. "Your magic is not strong enough to stop me, foolish wench."

In the den Kate Tillman began, a shade nervously, to recite a spell in Latin.

Max was standing quietly next to the oddly glowing doorway. He shook his head. "Outmoded spell, not a chance of working."

"I heed it not! It has no effect!" roared Morax. "Now I'll once again torment your fellows."

"I really wish you'd go away. This

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hasn't worked out at all. He's even more stubborn than you."

"There is no way to stop me now. Each night at this enchanted hour I shall return to have my way."

"That's another thing, you keep doing these silly things to people. Can't you zero in on him, give him a real scare. I wouldn't mind your messing up the rest of us if—"

"Morax does as he pleases. None can stop such an all powerful demon!"

"Correction." Max crossed the threshold, unfolding a sheet of yellow paper from his pocket. "This is a very effective spell, worked out by a demonologist working in tandem with a computer. Been tested on a lot tougher demons than you, always works."

Crouched just outside the magic circle, face illuminated bythe flickering flames of the ring of votive candles, was Kate. A patch of smooth tan skin showed between the top of her white slacks and her green jersey. A hand pressed to her left breast, she was staring at the demon who stood within the circle.

He was impressive. Over nine feet high, muddy green in color, covered with dry scales, his growling mouth packed with needle-like teeth. His bulging eyes glowing with an unsettling yellow light.

"Impotent fool!" he warned Max. "I will visit numerous annoyances upon you."

Clearing his throat, Max said, "Okay, here we go. Zimimar, Gorson, Agares, Leraie, Zenophilus," he read slowly and carefully.

"Bah, this has no ... I do feel decidedly...." Morax brought his terrible clawed paws up to his scaly face. "Gar..."

"Wierus, Pinel, Belphegor," continued Max.

The demon was panting, snarling, spewing greenish smoke from his mouth and ears.

Max kept on reciting the spell.

Morax shook, huddled in on himself, began to fade. Another moment and he was gone, even the smell of him.

The candles sputtered and died, the house was silent again.

Folding up the spell and slipping it away, Max crossed and touched Kate's shoulder. "I'll see you home."

Taking his hand, she got to her feet. "I ... I wrote that book, you know."

"*Curse of the Demon*. Yeah, I figured that out," he said, as he guided her to the doorway. "After comparing his earlier works with it."

"I was so dumb, I signed some wretched agreement with Boz that gave him 90 percent of all the profits and 100 percent of the credit," she said. "Demonology has always been a hobby of mine. I did a really splendid job on that book. Thing is, I was timid and figured I needed someone like Boz Snowden to help me break into print."

They left through the back door. "So when he moved here, you followed. Deciding to go after a bigger share of the money the book's earning."

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"Yes, although Bronco doesn't know that part of it," she said. "He's off in Ethiopia and Portugal and such places, never even knew I did the damn book."

"When you confronted Boz Snowden, he wouldn't give in?"

The rain was falling harder. Max put his arm around her slim shoulders.

"He simply threatened me, wouldn't listen at all," she said. "He's pretty vain; I think he's convinced himself that *Curse* wasn't a collaboration at all and that the book is entirely his. Well, I can get pretty mad and I decided to fix him good. The reason *Curse* is so good, Max, is because I really believe in demonology. And, damn it, it works."

"Somewhat too well."

"I summoned up Morax, that was easy, and ordered him to plague Snowden," she explained. "Except the demon started plaguing the whole area, all the houses. I suppose, giving him the benefit of the doubt, it's difficult to zero in on a small target. When I realized what was going on, I tried to send him off. Except, as you saw, I couldn't control Morax. He kept coming back night after night to play his pranks. On top of which, Boz has been very stubborn and, even though I told him the weird happenings were happening because he'd cheated me, he hasn't given in. All in all, it's been an awful mess."

"Your library of occult literature isn't broad enough for you to fool around with this sort of thing."

"How'd you know about my—"

"You hid the books in the hall closet this morning before you'd let me in the house," he replied. "I found 'em when I went to wash my hands."

"I should have expected that, you being a detective."

"Why'd you use the empty house as a base?"

"I didn't want to summon up a demon in our own place," she said as they neared her home. "There might have been a mess, and Bronco is very fastidious. How'd you know I'd been using that particular place?"

"I went through all the houses today, even the unoccupied ones. The remains of your magic circle showed on the floor," he told her. "My guess was we had a demon who'd gotten out of hand and that you'd be going back each night to try to keep him from reappearing."

"I'm sorry, more or less, that Morax made trouble for all the Circle people," Kate said, moving free of him and climbing to her front door. "But I'm not at all sorry about Boz Snowden. I'd still like to put a few more curses on him."

Max said, "I know a good literary attorney in Manhattan. Suppose we go in and talk to him tomorrow."

"You mean I ought to use legal means instead of supernatural to get what's rightfully mine?"

"Slower but sometimes more effective."

She shrugged, resigned. "Well,

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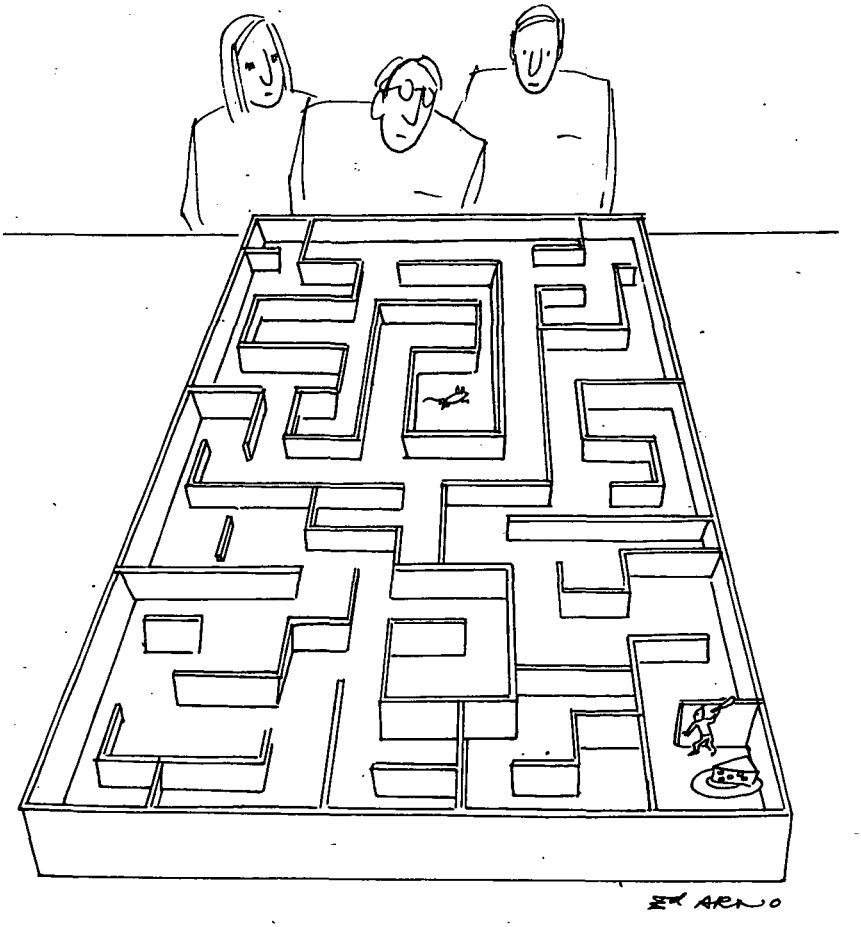
since demons turned out to be so unreliable, I may as well go to the law."

"I'll be driving into Manhattan tomorrow; you can come along."

"I'll do that." She opened the door. "Can I offer you a cup of tea?"

He hesitated before answering, "You can."



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The hotline in Ed Wellen's new story is a phone line into the future, good for five minutes only, any question answered. How much information can you get in five minutes? You will be surprised.

Hotline

BY

EDWARD WELLEN

Shadows took shape at the edge of sight as though they meant to mean something. Still, they were shadows only and it should have been easy to stare them out of menace. But Junior Hockaday tunneled his vision and hurried short of outright running, thrusting himself along the friendless streets as if to outstrip his own shadow.

Stretching shadow meant it was getting on toward evening. Mrs. Gray was getting on toward evening. Her face embedded rather then embodied the virtues. She, if no one else, would worry because of the meal he was late getting home to.

The hour was late to begin with because he had stayed after school for third grade's softball team tryouts. Granddad Dolbear wanted him to be well-rounded, not round-shouldered. Granddad would feel Junior had let him down. The contours of the bench did not promote a straight back.

But the real lateness was more Watson the chauffeur's fault. Watson must have got the hour of pickup wrong or the limo had got caught in a traffic backup. No excuse. Granddad put up with no excuses.

Junior would have no excuse for not waiting. Even if parochial school let out early or Watson came late, Junior was always, *always*, to wait. Hurrying along in pleasurable fright, Junior excused himself to himself.

He had meant to wait, had started to wait. But, while waiting, he had made a swap with Marty Manzetti, traded Marty a brand-new pocket calculator for a cheap four-color, three-colors-nearly-dry ballpoint pen.

The deal was something Granddad would have understood. Granddad said that while it was true you couldn't buy friends, you could buy friendship.

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But Marty might repent having too much the better of the bargain, might resent owing Junior friendship. So while Junior longed to stick around with Marty, and with Marty's pal Tommy Reis, it seemed wise to split before whatever qualms hit Marty.

So here was Junior hurrying away, afraid every step that Marty would change his mind and undo the swap. He willed himself deaf in case Marty should call him back, yet felt himself strain to hear. Blocks away, he thought he heard Marty and Tommy laugh. Junior had a chauffeured limo, but Marty and Tommy had made the team.

H wondered if they wondered why he hadn't waited. That, like the trade, like his showing at the tryouts, was just one thing more to snicker over about the jerky rich Hockaday kid. His face felt hot.

Then he rounded a corner. Ah. Now he had only the shadows of evening and of coming events to cope with.

He would get it. He smiled. Watson the chauffeur would get it worse. Not from Belle — Belle was his mother and sweet on Watson — but from Granddad, who was sweet on no one ... or, as Belle put it, sweet on No. One. It wouldn't matter that it was Junior who had broken the rule; Watson should have been there on time. The streets were too risky for Junior. A bad man was looking to steal him.

It had happened once, the bad man had stolen him, but he had been too young then to remember it now.

The bad man was his father.

Junior knew it had happened, because Belle had told him and Granddad had told him and Mrs. Gray the housekeeper had told him and Watson the chauffeur had told him. They had not come out and told him *why*, but he had pieced it together from what they said and from what the kids at school said their parents said.

There had been a furious and famous custody battle and his mother had won him in one state and his father had won him in another state and his father and mother had stolen him back and forth from each other across the United States.

Junior sometimes wondered at all that fuss over Junior.

The irony — at seven, Junior was too young to define irony but not too young to feel it — was that Junior had come in the first place as an unwelcome surprise. He had come through despite the father's vasectomy and the mother's pill, outwitted both and beaten all the odds any one spermatozoon is heir to.

That much he gathered from Belle's drunken reproaches. "Boy, for something that couldn't happen, you sure brought a lot of trouble."

He was bringing more trouble now. Soon Mrs. Gray would huff and puff herself up over having to keep his food warm. Soon Watson would use the car phone to call in and ask Mrs. Gray if Junior had made it home yet. Mrs.

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Gray and Watson would be afraid to tell Granddad Dolbear, and afraid not to. Granddad didn't like anyone breaking in on him while he went over the figures that had sped past on the racetrack of his private ticker and smelled out the market trend. If Belle hadn't already gone out on the town, she would fume at having to hang around till Junior made it home.

The shadows made him nervous. He kept looking past them for the limo to catch up with him. He should've waited for Watson. No doubt rules were good for you, but he hated rules. Grown-ups could tell you what to do and could make you do it. That was power. That was what power meant. When he grew up he would have power. Mad at the world, mad at himself, warning the shadows off, he plucked at hedges he passed, banged his fist against poles along the way.

It wasn't a nice way. Watson usually took the longer, nicer way. Here stretched the dead openness of a torched neighborhood. A ghost of wind left his hair in shock. The lump in his throat was his heart. His legs scissored a shortcut. Now homes began. A dog in its own yard barked at him. He didn't look at the dog but the dog kept barking at him. Even after he gave the dog possession of its world, it barked at his lingering fear-smell.

Rough-looking people eyed him curiously. He tried not to stare back. Belle and Granddad and Mrs. Gray would have said these were not his kind. Were they his father's kind? Granddad thought Junior took too much after dad. Dad's life jingled with spurs of the moment. Dad was a connectionless young man on the make who had tried to start at the top by knocking up the boss's daughter, whatever that meant.

It wouldn't've been much better in Granddad's eyes if Junior took more after Belle. Belle was the poor little rich girl who had more dollars than sense. Belle's life jangled with swings of mood. One minute she was all cuddle and hug, next minute all ready to slap him for getting his sticky fingers in her hairdo or on her frock.

Junior had learned to duck her mood swings, learned to watch himself closely, learned he had a lot to learn. Most of all he had learned he had to learn to start thinking like a Dolbear. It was hard to think like a Dolbear. Granddad had caught him once in a lie. Junior got the idea it wasn't the lie Granddad minded so much as it was the catching.

Granddad couldn't bring himself to use the name Junior. Granddad would look at Junior and say, "So this is what's going to carry on the line," and shake his head, though sometimes his head shook by itself. Granddad had Parkinson's. (Whose did Parkinson have? Bad joke, bad taste. All part of the fun, badness, tastelessness.)

Just as well Granddad showed affection rarely. Granddad gave a scary kiss. Granddad's touch was dry with a

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dryness that rubbed off on you. How old he was. That answer called for a question. How old was he? Sixty? Old.

Long ago — last year? — he remembered watching Granddad hold to the banister and climb the stairs. Granddad climbed like a child, establishing both feet on one step before attempting the next. Mrs. Gray explained Granddad's dizziness in a mutter. To Junior it sounded as if Granddad had Many-ears sinned-Rome; Junior pictured a mile-long train of confessional boxes. Granddad lasered a look of fury at Mrs. Gray and Junior from the top of the stairs, and the following day workers came to put in a chair that rode the slant. It looked inviting, but Junior was not to play on it.

Behind him, a motorcycle roar scared a jump out of Junior. He jerked his head around. The motorcyclist's purple helmet matched the purple motorcycle. Neat. Goggles made the rider into a bug-eyed monster.

Granddad hated motorcyclists. "What a motorcyclist really does is fart in everyone's face." This motorcyclist didn't vroom past. The goggle gaze fixed on Junior. The sickle slowed, keeping pace with Junior to the crossing.

There the rider slewed it around to a stop in front of Junior with one booted foot and braced it with the same.

Somehow Junior knew the voice before it spoke. "Junior, it's me. Your father." The rider lifted the goggles away. The bad man. Sander Hockaday, Sr. Daddy.

Junior stood rooted. The bad man smiled, Daddy smiled, pleased Junior hadn't bolted.

The smile wiped away and Daddy looked quickly all around. Then the smile delineated itself again, and Daddy took the helmet off and put it on Junior. Looking out from under, Junior saw the smile grow. Daddy tightened the chin strap; a wobbly fit but the helmet would stay on.

Once more a grown-up did not ask but told. "Okay, Junior. Climb aboard."

Junior got on behind his father and dug fingers into wide studded belt. Daddy twisted the handlebars, kicked off, and away they went, whipping the wind, Sander Hockaday, Senior, and Sander Hockaday, Junior.

From far away came the memory — a skip phenomenon of the mind, clear as if it dissolved the substance of distance — the memory of riding piggyback on someone (Daddy?) who quickly tired of the sport and peeled the piglet's trotters away and dumped the squealing piglet.

Junior, leaning left to see ahead, spotted the limo. Junior's tightening alerted Daddy, but Watson had already spotted them.

The horn blasted without letup, as if to rattle Daddy with sound, and the limo steered straight at them.

Junior felt Daddy's body grip itself. "Hold tight!" The words tore loose but Junior caught their meaning and held tight.

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The sickle swung sharply right, jumped the curb. Junior bounced hard but kept his seat. The sickle rode the walk. The limo yawed and U'd as Junior looked back. Watson was a world-class driver. For the moment, stanchions and poles kept the limo from cutting them off; but it would have open ground at the crossing coming up. Unless Daddy kept going around and around the same block. And that was no good, from Daddy's point of view, because Junior could see Watson speaking into the car phone and that meant reinforcements would soon show.

But now Daddy tightened again and once more swung sharply right, shooting them through a narrow passage between buildings.

Junior heard the limo brake and looked back to see Watson sink the bulletproof window of the front right-hand door and point a gun at them, resting both forearms on the sill. The first shot clipped his father's earlobe, leaving a big ruby drop like an earring.

Watson was crazy. If Junior's father died or fell winged, the sickle would pile up and the crash would kill Junior as well. But Watson either didn't weigh that or counted his place as lost now anyway.

Daddy swore. He wove the sickle within the narrow bounds, and the second shot missed, bringing only a small hard rain of brick bits and brick dust. Then they were safe, whizzing away through a maze of alleys.

Doubling back a few times to make sure it had shaken pursuit, the sickle at last pulled up alongside a camper sitting off in a far corner of a supermarket parking lot. They got off, and Daddy swiftly stowed the sickle and themselves aboard the camper. "Here's where we switch getaway vehicles."

Inside the camper, behind closed curtains, Daddy grinned at Junior. He seemed proud of his luck. "If I'd planned it, it couldn't've worked out neater. Here I was, only casing the school and familiarizing myself with the route, when I spotted you walking along as carefree as you please. Couldn't believe my eyes. But I saw my chance and I grabbed it. Knew I'd never get another one like it."

Then Daddy got sore. "What kind of protection they giving you anyway? What are you now, seven? What's wrong with them, to let you roam like that all by yourself? Don't they know old man Dolbear's money draws all kinds of crazies?" Daddy's face broke out again in a grin. "Old Moneytesticles. Let him sweat a little. And *her*. Let *her* worry too; give *her* maternal feelings some exercise. Let them wonder whether it's a snatch for ransom or whether it's me." He touched his earlobe gingerly. "Damn that chauffeur. Could've killed me." He put something on the now-dark blood ruby. It stung a grimace out of him. "Get you anywhere, Junior?"

Junior shook his head.

Daddy nodded. "Good." He grew

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thoughtfully brisk. "They'll be looking for a man and boy on a motorcycle. We took care of the motorcycle. Now for the boy."

Belle had kept Junior's hair long, and now Daddy merely bleached Junior's hair and combed it another way. Then he stuck Junior into a pair of unisex slacks and seemed satisfied.

"Still, you better stay out of sight till we put Connecticut behind us. Then it'll be okay for you to sit up front and enjoy the ride. We'll be traveling the back roads and not staying at hotels or motels. All the way to California. No school for a while." He jabbed Junior's chin lightly. "You won't mind that too much, will you?"

Junior shook his head.

"That's the boy." His father's eyes clouded slightly, taking in the new Junior. "Hope soft living hasn't spoiled you. Do you good to rough it some. I can't match old man Dolbear's wad. But don't worry, kid, you won't have to eat pet food." He handed Junior a candy bar and watched Junior devour it hesitantly. "We're going to have a lot of fun together, Junior. Right, kid?"

Junior nodded. That set Junior nodding off. Daddy settled him in a bunk. He didn't realize how weary he had grown till he lay down to rest. He curled up in a question mark. Before answering himself with sleep, he was dimly aware of the camper rolling along through the dazzling darkness and of his father at the wheel listening with a chuckle to the police band that had them sighted vrooming all over the place. Junior had finished the candy bar and his curled hand had nothing to hold to but itself. Somewhere along the line he had lost the one-color four-color pen.

Things were never what they were going to be. Camping out had promised to be fun. Camping out had been real fun sometimes but forced fun much of the time. It seemed Daddy had to psych himself, remind himself he had won this round, but had to keep dancing till the end of the match. Through it all, Junior had a sense of himself stretching both ways from now.

Now itself seemed hard to grasp. Now slipped by, gravitated into the past. Yet though the gravitation should have been building in the amassing past, the attraction seemed all in the yet-to-be.

Camping out had ended. Now that that now was then, he looked ahead with uncertain hope to this new unfolding.

Weeks before snatching Junior, Daddy had changed his name and address, leaving no trail for Belle and old man Dolbear to pick up. Daddy had foresightedly leased half a San Francisco duplex in the new name, and now with a turn of the key they moved right in.

"If anybody asks, our last name is Petrina. Got that?"

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Junior nodded.

Daddy lugged in the last of their furnishings, a big cardboard box bulging with odds and ends. He unlapped the flaps of the box. First out was a phone.

He caught Junior's look and grinned. "Strictly legal, kid. I did what the phone company tells you to do when you move: cut the cord and take the phone with you to save on the cost of installing. Tomorrow I'll stop in at the business office and arrange for the hookup."

Daddy set it down on the floor and turned back to the box and didn't notice what Junior noticed: vibrating with a life of its own, the cut end of the cord snaked itself up into half a catenary and hung there, defying gravity.

Before Junior could be sure he was seeing what he was seeing or say anything about it or even point to it, the phone rang.

Daddy, deep in digging out and uncocooning a lamp, looked startled, then sheepish. "Must be next door. These thin walls."

Junior stood nearer the ringing. "No, Daddy, it's our phone."

"All right, then wise guy, don't just stand there. Answer it."

Junior reached out as though the phone might burn his hand, tentatively. He took hold and uncradled it. It was the heat of his hand that warmed the plastic. The ringing stopped and he heard line hum. He spoke into the phone. "Hello?"

The phone spoke back. "Hello, Junior."

Junior nearly dropped the phone, but the voice conveyed warmth and fondness despite its artificial sound, Junior's sense of its being a complex of computerized tones. "How did you know my name?"

"Some day you'll find out. Meanwhile, if you could get your father to the phone...."

"I'll try. Daddy, will you take the call?"

Daddy still hadn't noticed the hang of the cord; he put on his playing-along voice. "I don't know. Who's the other party?"

The other party heard and chuckled. "Tell him the Other Party is Opie for short."

"It says to tell you it's Opie for short."

"It does, does it? Say we're busy unpacking and tell Opie to call again later."

Junior listened to Opie and repeated what Opie said. "Opie says to tell you it would be advisable not to disconnect. Opie had hard time placing this call and is maintaining the connection only with great difficulty. Opie says taking this call will be to your financial advantage."

Daddy glanced up, half-puzzled, half-annoyed. "Fun's fun, Junior. There's a time for it, and this isn't—"

"Opie says keeping this line open will change not only your life but the future of the whole world."

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Daddy stared at the cord and put the lamp down with great care. He moved dreamlike nearer Junior and the phone, his gaze riding the impossible upsweep of the umbilical to its impossible end in air. He gave the cord a wary tug. The cut end of the cord remained firmly fixed to nothingness.

He took the phone from Junior in an offhand way but he wore a strained smile. He used his playing-along voice as though even yet he thought this might be some trick of Junior's, some toy version of the Indian rope. "Go ahead. It's your dime."

"My dimension, you mean." Daddy held the phone enough away from his ear that Junior caught Opie's words and Opie's chuckle. "Sorry about that. Hello, Sander."

Daddy went shaky. His glance flickered at Junior and his other hand braced the hand that held the phone to mouth and ear, but he had nothing to shore up his voice with. "Who is this? And how—"

Opie cut in. "Here's the deal. No questions about who I am, where I am, when I am, or why. No other strings. Ask me anything about your future. I'll answer whatever questions I can, as honestly as I can, as fast as I can." An apologetic cough. "That reminds me. The essence is of time. I can hold this line open only so long."

"How long?"

"Five minutes."

"That's not long."

"Of course if you want to spend it discussing relativity, it'll pass in a flash. But I know you're itching for the practical bearings, so here's a helpful hint. Time narrows upstream as the probabilities branch away. At my end, our conversation fills one unbroken five-minute window. At your end, the five minutes can last you your lifetime if you space them out prudently. If I were you, I'd keep careful count. You have 4 minutes 25 seconds when I say ... *mark.*"

Daddy looked agonized. "I have to have time to think. Quick, how do I spread out the five minutes?"

"Four minutes 19 seconds ... *mark.* Since it was Junior who answered first, imprinting me, in a manner of speaking, 'Start' in his voice will actuate transmission and 'Stop' in his voice will put me on hold. Four minutes 9 seconds ... *mark.*"

Daddy eyed his wristwatch feverishly. "What horse will win the fourth at Santa Anita today?"

Opie came right back. "Mudpie, returning 11.4, 9.6, and 4.4 across the board. Ran it in 3:25, with bug girl Jennie Caldwell aboard —"

"That's enough. Hurry, Junior, say 'Stop.'"

"Stop."

Looking numb, Daddy cradled the handset. Then he grew aware of what he had done and gazed at in horror. He hit his own brow with the heel of his hand. "Now that was damn clever ... clammed ever ... dumb, dumb, dumb." All sweaty, he uncradled the

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handset again. "Hello? Opie? Are you there?"

Only line hum.

"Junior, say 'Start.'"

"Start."

"Hello, Junior." Opie's voice made Junior feel warm all over.

Quickly Daddy cut short his own sigh of relief and answered for Junior. "Just testing. Junior, say 'Stop.'" He gripped Junior's shoulder because Junior was slow to respond.

"Ouch. Stop."

Daddy hung up with gingerly assurance. Hanging up didn't mean cutting off. Crazy, but no crazier than the cut end of cord hanging in air. Daddy looked from that to his wristwatch and shook himself. "I'd better hurry." He made for the door. "Be good, Junior. I'll be back before you know it."

"Where are you going, Daddy?"

Daddy's glance ricocheted from Junior to the phone. He laughed strangely. "Believe it or not, Junior, I've got to get to a phone."

Daddy had said not to open the door to anyone. So Junior didn't jump up to let Daddy in even when he knew it was Daddy muttering to himself about the slippery key and the shifty keyhole.

Junior turned the portable television set off and curled up on the air mattress. Now, unless he caught the rerun some day, he'd never know if the monster ate the very last bite of Earth, the tiny chunk remaining with the few survivors standing on it. But Daddy would feel less guilty if he thought Junior had been enjoying himself.

The door opened. Junior rubbed his eyes and sat up.

Daddy grinned penitently. "Did I wake you, Junior? Sorry I'm later than I thought I'd be." He had to back in through the doorway, his arms were so full.

He had on new shoes and a new sports jacket, but it was riches of junk food and toys poking out of the paper bags that widened Junior's eyes. Daddy's gaze shot to the phone to confirm that it was still there and still in its impossible configuration. Daddy let out a silent sigh. Junior smelled whiskey.

Daddy walked bouncy over to the folding table the television stood on. He put his hand on the set to move it over for room, and its warmth made his mouth twist. "Junior, there's more than a touch of Belle in you, I see."

But he was in too good a humor to follow that up. He let the goodies slide to the table. His gaze fixed on the phone. "I'll tell you the truth, Junior. I thought sure it was all some elaborate hoax. Wouldn't put it past old bear Dolman to go to any extreme to have me certified. But it works, Junior, it works. Your pal Opie was on the nose. Mudpie won and paid off exactly like good old Opie said. I took a chance and hit it big. If I'd taken a bigger chance I'd've hit it bigger. But even a mind bet would've been worth it to

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know Opie's leveling. I got lucky at last."

But all at once Daddy got sad and sorry for himself and sat down heavily. "Too much good luck is bad luck. If I won big consistently, gambling on whatever, they'd sooner knock me off than pay me off. Have to use my head."

Junior could see Daddy use his head, watched him think hard.

Daddy stared suddenly at Junior and the impact almost made Junior jump. "The stock market. Commodity futures. Options. That's where the leverage is. Opie, your name is Archimedes." Daddy's grin turned him Junior's age. "Boy, will I show old man Dolbear up. And Belle never thought much of my wanting to play the market."

He grew more earnest than Junior had seen him. "Junior, listen to me good. Nobody else must ever know about Opie. Hear that? Nobody. Never."

Daddy held Junior's gaze for the longest time. Then the room grew lighter again, and Daddy swept an arm toward the surprises. "Okay, son. Dig in, have fun."

Junior smiled dutifully, and dutifully dug in. But the fun had gone out of the fun.

Foggy and early next morning, Daddy drove off in the camper. He came back in a few hours and fumed and paced till the landlady, who lived alone except for a cat in the other duplex apartment, went out with her shopping cart. Daddy waited for her to pull herself out of sight, then he snuck in the hammer and nails and power saw and plywood sheets and studding he had brought back in the camper.

While Junior watched for the landlady to come home, Daddy, wincing hangoverishly, banged together a partition or false wall slap up against the raw end of the phone cord. The false wall seemed somewhat out of true and gave the room an oddly constricted feel. But it satisfied Daddy.

He gingerly raised the phone from the floor and slid a stand under it. Now there was a downsweep to the end of the cord. Daddy fitted a small black box around the end and screwed the box to the false wall so that the whole thing looked now like any home phone installation.

And he finished in time. Junior could hear the landlady wonder why her cat seemed so jumpy.

Junior held a newspaper dustpan while Daddy swept up the sawdust and splinters and bent nails.

Daddy spoke softly, more to himself than to Junior. "That takes care of that. Trouble is, the damn landlady has the right to barge in almost any time. I didn't get her permission to make alterations. So she can toss us out if she wants to. Just to play it safe I'll have to buy the building. At whatever price."

He stared at the phone and its cord.

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"Funny, just the other day I told myself I've been living out of a suitcase long enough, time to settle down in one place. Funny because that thing tethers us here. Junior, we're going to live right here the rest of our days."

While Junior thought that over, Daddy's mouth quirked. "There's one thing I won't ask Opie. I won't ask Opie the day of my death." He shook himself. "So here's where we settle down. It really makes no difference where you settle down. Anywhere can be the center of the universe. We have the power to bring the Rockies and the Himalayas and the Alps and the Andes to Mohammed."

He grinned. "Still, Mohammed has to go out at least one more time. Mohanned has to arrange for the phone company to install one garden variety phone."

Before going out, Daddy hid the Opie phone under a dropcloth so that when the installer came to put in the ordinary phone catercorners from the Opie phone, the installer wouldn't notice the Opie phone.

Funny, Daddy didn't *look* Arab.

Junior learned not to bother Daddy while Daddy boned up on commodity futures. Daddy's mind-set was on trading fundamentally, looking for natural or economic factors. He made up a long list of questions to ask Opie — about when there would be droughts in the grain belt and freezes in the citrus belt, famine in Bangladesh, wheat sales to Russia and China....

Then it flashed on Daddy that he could skip all that. "I didn't have to know Mudpie's form or breeding or stable or anything. All I have to know is the market itself. I have to remember to think of the future as a black box." He lectured Junior. "You remember that too, Junior."

He threw away his list and started again. "If I wasted my time, at least I haven't wasted Opie time." He tried phrasing his question a dozen ways, crossed out words, and at last felt ready. He set up a recorder and started the tape rolling. Just in case the taping went wrong, he posed a ballpoint over paper. He lifted the handset, smiled tensely at line hum, and nodded. "Okay, Junior, say 'Start.'"

"Start."

Wasting no time on greetings, Daddy asked Opie how commodities would stand at the end of ninety days.

Opie rattled off the answers.

"Junior, say 'Stop.'"

"Stop."

Daddy hung up with a trembling hand. "I'm rich." He shook himself. "But not if I sit dreaming I'm rich."

He listened to the playback, double-checking it against the scribbles he had made. He used the garden variety phone to get today's quotes from the commodity dealer at his brokerage house. He tapped out the differences on his pocket calculator.

In ninety days, silver would show a 42-cents-an-ounce rise, gold a 12-dol-

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lars-an-ounce drop. So Daddy bought calls and puts. He paid premiums giving him the right to buy silver and the right to sell gold.

Same with frozen pork bellies and nest-run eggs and yellow sorghum and feeder cattle and cocoa beans and other things people thought other people needed. Daddy juggled and jigsawed his purchases to parlay and pyramid his profits.

And at the end of the ninety days he was rich.

Though of course it wouldn't satisfy him till he outriched old man Dolbear. Another half minute of Opie time, another 90-day wait, took care of that.

First thing that changed, the whole building belonged to them now. The landlady and the cat had sold out and moved away. Daddy refurnished that half of the building as a place to entertain friends. The friends were mostly young pretty women.

Another change, Daddy's can opener and hotplate and the home delivery of pizzas and baskets of chicken parts with all the fixings gave way to a live-in cook.

And Junior had tutors in different subjects who came in and subjected him several hours a day to learning. Daddy was taking no chances Belle would have truancy grounds for nullifying Daddy's California-won custody of Junior.

And Daddy hired security guards to protect the Hockaday compound against the bad-man forces of Belle and old man Dolbear and against crazies. For the secret was out, the Petrina alias ended. Daddy had crumpled his breakfast paper on finding a gossipist wondering that the commodities king lived in the modest house of his beginnings and naming his name. The modest house grew to be the center of a large electronically fenced-in compound as Daddy bought up all the houses and land adjoinging theirs and razed and landscaped to suit his whim.

What really changed most was Daddy. Daddy kept busy keeping lawyers and accountants busy finding tax dodges and loopholes. It seemed to Junior that Daddy wanted all the money there was and wanted to hold on to it.

Sometimes Daddy had time for Junior. At least they often breakfasted together. And one morning Daddy told Junior his dream. He had dreamed last night that he had forgotten he still owned a contract for November beans and that in the dream he had wakened to the sound of grain pouring from the backs of trucks, an unending convoy of trucks delivering the unwanted grain and burying the compound under a mountain of the stuff. Then he had wakened for real; the sound was the sound of rain. It still rained, and Daddy listened to the rain and grinned. "I hear it's good for the crops." Funny, Junior had dreamed last night too and

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was bursting to tell Daddy his dream. Rising floodwaters threatened the house, and Junior was trying to phone for help but got only busy signals. Then at last he got through. But the listener was deaf. Junior didn't tell Daddy his dream because Daddy seemed still full of his own. Just as well. Junior might have had to confess he had wet the bed.

That was one morning. Another morning, Daddy needed Junior to actuate Opie briefly. See, Daddy got in trouble with the government for getting a corner on soybeans. He got out of that trouble, but it cost him, and he made up his mind to *be* the government. Or at least be the power behind the government. Then this kind of trouble would never befall him again. He planned to help either a man named Varley or a man named Meucci win the presidency. But first he wanted to know which one would win in November, so he'd know who to support in the primaries and during the campaign. That's why he needed Junior to say "Start" and "Stop."

Anxious not to lose a microsecond of Opie time, Daddy stepped on Junior's "Start." "Varley beats Meucci this November?"

Opie came right back. "Meucci beat Varley."

Daddy lifted an eyebrow — Varley led in all the polls — but seemed to feel expansive and tacked on another quick question. "Confirm the count. Two and three-quarter minutes left, right?"

"Wrong. One minute 43 seconds ... *mark*."

Daddy stood frozen several terrible seconds longer, then got the words out. "Junior, say 'Stop.'"

"Stop."

Daddy hung up mechanically. There was a long spell of Daddy regrouping himself. Then Daddy spoke almost too calmly. "Junior, you haven't been using the phone?"

"Well, a few times when I was lonely I picked it up and said hello to Opie and Opie said hello back. But only a few times."

For a while there, Junior thought the bad man was going to wallop him. But Daddy drew his gaze back into shallow focus and spoke to himself.

"My God. A whole minute gone. What waste, what a stupid waste." He focused on Junior. "Did you and Opie exchange more than hellos?"

"A little more."

"For instance."

"Opie says these junctions bob like quarks in the wake of a finnegan. A finnegan is matter released from a tranced state."

"Great. Kind of invaluable information I need."

"Opie said he learned somewhere that thermodynamics is a black box and that's how he discovered the way to make the time connection."

"Good for Opie." Junior felt himself go out of focus and Daddy spoke to himself again. "Can't get that minute back. Have to make the most of the

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minute forty left." He shook himself. "No time to worry about that now."

Daddy crossed to the ordinary phone and set about buying a newspaper chain. He had a conference call with his lawyer and his accountant and his banker and his broker. That was how you did it. He hung up, sat back, and grinned at Junior, who hadn't wanted to draw attention to himself by leaving. "I'll throw editorial backing to Sunshine Bill Meucci. He'll think I swung the election for him. He'll owe me."

Then Daddy looked across at the Opie phone and frowned and had carpenters come in. The room shrank again as they walled off the Opie phone with another partition, much solider and with a door that locked; Daddy kept the only key.

To show he didn't hold it against Junior for piddling Opie time away, and because he felt good about figuring out how to make the most of what Opie time remained, and not just to have Junior handy if he needed "Start" and "Stop," Daddy had Junior at his side when he was ready to unlock the door again.

They entered the narrow compartment and eyed the Opie phone.

Daddy put his arm around Junior's shoulders. His arm had grown weightier, so that it seemed as much burden as comfort. Daddy gave Junior a sudden hug. Daddy looked guilty, as though it surprised him to find that he cared. "Son, the fortune I've been building, the power base, means nothing to me in and of itself. It's what it stands for: the Hockaday line. One day it will all be yours. Yours to pass on to your offspring. So it's never too soon for you to understand you must preserve it and use it well." He spoke as though explaining it to Junior helped him understand it himself.

A voice spoke over Daddy's pocket intercom. "Mr. Hockaday, there's this installation person at the main post says she has an appointment. She's clean."

"From IC?"

"Yessir."

"Right. Show her here."

Escorting the installation person, a security guard followed the beep to Daddy. The security guard had never been in this part of the house and eyed the cramped compartment with oblique curiosity before leaving at Daddy's nod. The installation person wore an IC patch on her coveralls, which looked clean to Junior but not all that clean.

Daddy spoke with her, and Junior gathered IC was an interconnect company that attached non-telephone-company-supplied-equipment to the telephone company network. Daddy told her what he wanted.

"I want to send and receive high-speed data over this phone." He looked at her. "I mean high-speed."

She smiled. "Our Thunderburst III

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will take any speed transmission you want. I mean any."

"Perfect. One thing, though. Whatever you do, don't mess with the wiring of this phone."

She looked at him steadily. "No problem. We'll get you a pickup coil with a phone plug. A suction cup holds it to the handset and the plug goes into the jack of our Thunderburst III."

Before Daddy could stop her, she had unclipped a penlike tool from her pocket and touched it to the handset.

"Just making sure it's compatible. I'm not messing with the wiring."

A tiny needle swung wildly in the tiny window of the measuring instrument.

She stared at it. "I don't know. The induced currents are crazy, the lines of force are all wrong. You sure this phone works?" She made to pick up the handset.

But Daddy's hand shot out to hold it in its cradle. "It works."

She shrugged. "If you say so, sir."

"I say so. Just install a Thunderburst III. You'll keep this to yourself, won't you? I own IC."

Junior wondered why Daddy told her he owned IC in the first place if he wanted to keep his ownership secret.

Compact as the Thunderburst III was, it allowed standing room only in Opie's compartment. But Junior guessed that if this had been old man Dolbear's dining room Daddy would have looked as uptight.

Daddy had spent days readying the speedtape, squeezing five minutes' intensive questioning, redundant for safety and surety, into one instantaneous Donald Duck quack.

He had spent hours of real-time, millennia of stretch-time, dry-running Thunderburst III, testing input and output.

During a break, Daddy had spray-painted the Opie phone gold — then dissolved the gold away; the gold might tempt a thief who would otherwise pass up a thing no one in his right mind would think of carrying off to fence. Besides, Daddy had a fear he voiced to Junior — though it was himself thinking aloud — the fear that Opie was building him up to an awful letdown. "After all, there are hundreds of millions of phones in the world. Why mine? Why pick me to be so good to? Even if Opie chose me at random, there has to be a catch. If that's so, why honor the bastard?"

Now he braced himself, lifted the bastard's handset, listened to line hum, got the tape leader rolling, and, watching for blips, gestured Junior to say "Start" and almost at once "Stop." Daddy hung up sloppily, rocking the cradle, and smiled absently at Junior as they waited to wait.

Could Opie cope with Daddy's squeezetalk and would Opie reply in kind? Junior felt sure Opie could and would.

Ten minutes of Daddy and Junior's real-time passed real slow.

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"Taking the bastard hours."

The phone rang.

Daddy made himself take his time answering. He lifted the receiver with calm tenderness. Again watching for blips, he cued Junior. For Daddy, the space between "Start" and "Stop" looked an excruciating two seconds.

Excruciating too the half minute that followed, the half minute of pushing Thunderburst III's buttons to find out if Opie's answering two-seconds-long Donald Duck quack had meaning.

It had. It translated into kilometers of printout — or would have if it hadn't fed straight into Thunderburst III's memory. What it was, it was a seventy years' look into the future: what else would you call it when you had a complete file of Daddy's flagship newspaper, a respected paper of record (though Daddy had hedged by expressing his willingness to take a substitute should the paper fold or lose its integrity), for the next seventy years, every page of every number, ads and all, plus index?

They knew it was seventy because Daddy keyed in a request to see the date of the last available issue. He smiled a half-satisfied smile. "Only seventy years? Well, I guess that tells us *when* Opie is. I asked for a hundred years if possible, but it seems thirty are still in Opie's future."

Daddy nerved himself to ask Thunderburst III for a readout of everything on Sander Hockaday, Sr., in the index. Item after item marched across the screen. Trouble was, Daddy speed-read. Groups of letters double-timed past Junior's eyes meaninglessly except for now and then a subliminal sense of the Hockaday name.

The parade ended abruptly. Daddy waited for more, asked for more. He looked half-miffed. "I know I'm trying to stay out of the public eye and I see I largely succeed. But this is ridiculous. Thunderburst III says there's nothing at all about me after seven years from now. How can I drop out of history right after I pull off my greatest coup?"

He tried again but got the same blank look from Thunderburst III. Two, three items a year for the next seven years. Then nothing.

"There should be *something* more. My obit at least. Unless ... unless I have more than seventy years still coming to me." He brightened. "My God, I never thought I'd live to such a ripe old age." A shadow crept back. "Or do I deep-freeze myself, because of some incurable disease, sooner and secretly? Pull an Ambrose Bierce vanishing act? Or what?" He brightened again. "Maybe it isn't just me."

He punched up the sequence of headlines about Sunshine Bill Meucci. Not wanting to overlook anything, he slowed the march past — benefiting Junior, who could now make out most of the words.

Sunshine Bill would win in November and would be going strong for the next eight years, into January of the

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ninth year. Apparently Daddy's papers would have helped bring about a Constitutional Amendment allowing Sunshine Bill to run for a third term — a term Sunshine Bill would never serve.

During the inaugural ceremonies, some crazies would blow up Sunshine Bill and his Whole Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff and the Supreme Court and Most of Congress, along with an assortment of Foreign Dignitaries, plus the Float of America the Happy that happened to be passing the Reviewing Stand at the time.

After that, as the years and decades passed, Thunderburst III showed the entries trailing off in shorter and shorter references to the memorial services for the Martyred President.

Junior had never seen Daddy look paler, more shaken.

"Terrible thing, terrible. But I still have no idea why *I'm* not around."

Junior watched Daddy think.

"Can I prevent it? Can anyone change what the future says has already happened?" Daddy pouted. "It's not my responsibility if I'm not around to warn them. Anyway, Sunshine Bill and the others would never believe me if I tried to warn them. And I can't show them the proof — because it isn't proof yet. It's proof only when it happens — and then it's too late." Daddy wasn't talking to Junior but explaining himself to himself. "I'm not Donkey Oaty, tilting at the windmill of the gods. What will be will be. One thing's for sure. *I'm* not attending that inauguration."

His brow creased. "Wonder who the hell minds the store?"

He punched up the days following the Great Assassination. Daddy speed-read again but gave a running mutter.

"Should've guessed. Varley takes over. It's a coup, though the weasel words make it seem he's doing the country a favor. Wipes out the crazies. Bet it's so they can't say he was in on it."

Daddy punched up Varley's future and smiled grimly. "Anyway, in the end Varley gets his, even if the bastard does have too long a run."

Suddenly weary, Daddy shut Thunderburst III down and Daddy and Junior left Opie's compartment and Daddy locked the door.

That night and for many nights to come Junior had bad dreams about the Float of America the Happy.

Almost it seemed Daddy was rooting against himself when Sunshine Bill Meucci, heading the Democratic ticket in his run for his first term, and Larry Varley, heading the Third Party ticket, came down to the wire in November. Watching the late returns, Junior caught Daddy muttering, "Come on, Varley," as though hard wishing would change the changing numbers.

But the television projections showed Sunshine Bill nosing Varley out. And television cameras showed Sunshine Bill graciously winning and Varley grudgingly conceding. And Junior and Daddy found the story in the real-

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time fresh-from-the-presses newspaper word-for-word like Opie had given it ahead of time.

And Daddy beamed when Sunshine Bill phoned him to thank him for helping put the ticket over, so that mutter must've been a slip.

As if to get the future out of the way, Daddy used his Thunderburst III foreknowledge and programmed his computer to issue day-by-day buy and sell orders automatically for his brokerage houses to execute. After that he forgot about trading and let it take care of itself.

Though at least once that Junior knew of, Daddy got a kick out of projecting that Daddy would own everything. There'd come a time, curving surprisingly soon, when no matter how he traded he'd be buying from and selling to himself. But Daddy figured he had to give others a stake in the system or the system would destruct. So Daddy set his trading at something less than optimum.

The world shook Junior out of bed. Junior's first thought was that this must be what Daddy meant when he spoke of the system destructing.

Daddy's first thought, though he veered to make sure Junior hadn't suffered hurt, was of the Opie connection. He headed for Opie's compartment even before security, reporting in on his pocket intercom, told him it wasn't an attack but a major earthquake. He headed there even though he had for some time now shown vast disinterest in Opie.

The Hockaday compound had its own power supply; even so some lights flickered on only after stand-by generators took over. There had been temblors before, but nothing this high on the Richter in Junior's memory. And apparently not in Eulalia's.

Eulalia Cushman — that was Daddy's live-in mistress — was screaming. Daddy yelled Eulalia quiet and told her to forget her jewels and hurry outside on the lawn where she'd be safe.

He himself hurried inward. He glanced back, saw Junior following him. As if remembering that nothing bad had happened to Junior right about now — though if Daddy had looked into Junior's future he had never said anything about it — he let Junior tag along.

Feeling narrowly asleep, Junior watched Daddy unlock the door. The shock had jumped the handset out of the cradle. The cord still reached into the fake box but that didn't prove it hadn't torn loose from Opie. They drew nearer and heard line hum. The connection held. Daddy smiled and relocked the door.

They joined the others — Eulalia and the rest of the staff and the security guards — outside on the lawn listening to radio reports and gazing around at what the radio reported. "A relative displacement of twenty feet, as in the

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1906 quake...." Everywhere fires leaped up trying to reach the top of night. With frightening reassurance, dopplering sirens wailed that people were taking care of people.

Eulalia whined then and nagged later about the stupidity of a supposedly brilliant man living athwart the San Andreas fault. Why didn't Sander pick up and go? With his bread he could live anywhere. "You could buy the Riviera. Or Titan. Or —" "Or Kuwait, where they have harems." That shut her up for the moment but she kept threatening to leave. But everybody including Eulalia knew Daddy paid her too well.

Though he had known he would survive it, it was the earthquake shook Daddy up. Till then, Daddy had swung between two poles. Sometimes it was like the speedtalk exchanges with Opie — Daddy seemed bent on cramming all the living he could into the short span he knew he had coming; at such times he enjoyed exercising his clout. Other times Daddy seemed becalmed in horizonless gloom at the thought of misting away a few years from now; at such times he enjoyed nothing.

Now, rare for him, Daddy got almost embarrassingly fatherly.

"Son, forces of nature won't be the only emergencies you'll face. I have a good idea I won't always be around. You'll have to learn to handle yourself if you're going to handle the Hockaday empire." He scanned Junior thoughtfully. "For one thing, you're too shut in on yourself. You need a woman's touch to bring you out."

He had Eulalia give it a try.

Her idea of guiding Junior companionably was helping Junior paste cut-out oak leaves on the classroom windows. Just as the leaves weren't leaves, the windows weren't windows. Anyway, Daddy soon saw Eulalia was incapable of anything more than kindergarten stuff.

"Lord knows Eulalia's a woman and has a certain touch, but Lord knows she's not one to guide a kid — let alone *my* kid."

Eulalia looked relieved, but at the same time aggrieved.

Junior suddenly realized what it was about Eulalia that had tantalized him. Funny how Daddy always picked Belle look-alikes and behave-alikes.

Daddy stroked Eulalia into smiling. "That's okay. Eulalia is Eulalia is Eulalia. We'll just have to get someone from Outside."

Eulalia's smile stiffened, pasted on like an oak leaf.

Today was the day Martha Hubbard came into their lives.

Junior watched Daddy ask the mirror if he could get by without shaving. Daddy had seen the screen test of the applicant for governess and was about to interview her in person. He rubbed his grimace. He had shaved once already, in the morning, and he decided

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that was good enough.

Martha seemed old enough to Junior — with her granny glasses, ponytail, hoop earrings, and pedal pushers — but Daddy looked thoughtful and told her he wouldn't hold her youth against her. She had all the qualifications. Junior thought so too; Martha — in spite of her severe dress — was beautiful.

Her coming and her settling-in changed a lot of things. Junior's haphazard tutoring went by the board — the blackboard, that is. Martha tested Junior's aptitudes and individualized a teaching machine for him. Eulalia hung onto Daddy more, especially in Martha's presence, and her tone grew sticky-sweet when she worried out loud about Junior. The poor kid was going to ruin his eyes with all that studying, and could stuffing his brain with all that learning be good for him? But Martha never rose to the occasional thorn. And Daddy shaved oftener, even when it looked as if he didn't have to.

But maybe that last was because Daddy looked at himself more these days, as if to catch himself fading away — though in Junior's eyes he was only growing Daddier. Once Junior caught him scowling at what he saw look back and heard him mutter, "Mirror, be yourself." Trouble was, the mirror was never more mirror than in giving him back himself.

Martha had de-leafed the classroom windows but they still spelled fall. You'd never know to look at the windows it was a fine spring day with just a spicing of smog outside.

Feeling the pull of the day and the pall of thermodynamics, Junior squirmed warmth out of the chair. Sitting at the teaching machine, he found himself teasing the nitpicking machine by entering "heated exchange" for "heat exchanger."

It didn't lose its cool. "Are you sure that's what you mean to say, Junior?"

"I will not, repeat not, repeat myself. I don't chou my cabbage twice." He aborted the learning sequence. He wondered if the machine felt frustration.

Martha wasn't supervising at the moment, and he decided to play hookey. He keyed the machine into play mode.

It fed him two words at random. *Trophy* and *mimicry*. Now it was up to him to make new beginnings from old ends.

trophy mimicry
physically crystal
allying stallion
inguinal ionizes
inalienability zestfully

There. Now it was up to him to make sense of them and in some way connect them. All he could see was a glass unicorn doing something. Doing what? He strained to see more. He told himself it was nothing to get worked up about. This was just play. Word chains, that's all.

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But wasn't that the way life built itself up? Life was all play. Most serious thing there was: the word chain DNA. And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

He felt Martha before she leaned over his shoulder to see what he was at.

"What are you doing, Junior? Oh, word chains. Good work."

One thing he liked about her, she knew when to be no-nonsense and when to be nonsense. He joined her in smiling at the nonsense, then went hot. He was the unicorn. She was the virgin. He was Sander Hockaday, Jr., after all. He felt a strange stirring, a sudden fierce jealousy of Dad.

She met his gaze idly. "All right, Junior. Enough play. Back to thermodynamics."

Junior wouldn't confess even to himself that he was peeping tomming; he only happened to pass Martha's room at the time, and in spite of himself saw and heard what he saw and heard through the crack.

"Eulalia! What are you doing here? Gave me a scare to wake up and find you looking down at me."

"I hope you don't mind my walking in, Martha. I can't stand to sit around. It gets so boring waiting for *him* to get in the mood. Men! You know what I mean, Martha darling?"

"I think I do. Tell you the truth, I'm dying for girl talk."

"More than that. I'd like for us to be real close friends."

"I've felt drawn to you too, Eulalia."

Junior heard more warm talk along those lines and saw Martha and Eulalia hold each other lovingly. He felt stirrings of wonder, of jealousy, and of the physical change he was lately coming increasingly aware of. But when the talk and play got hot, Junior saw what Eulalia didn't see. Martha snaked a hand to the intercom and switched it on. At the same time, Martha began trying kindly to turn Eulalia off. Martha gently but firmly reminded Eulalia of their loyalties to Dad.

Junior slipped away at that point, just before Dad showed up and burst in. Junior gathered later by listening to the staff that Martha tried to absolve Eulalia but Dad revealed one of them had accidentally backed into the intercom switch and so inadvertently given him an earful of Eulalia's true feelings for him as against Eulalia's feelings for Martha. After that there was no more to say, but Eulalia said it.

Dad wasted no time giving Eulalia the boot, though he let her keep her jewels.

Junior felt funny about Martha after that but, funny again, she still made him ache with what had to be love.

Clandestinely Junior machined a picklock. Junior had the tools to work with. Dad wanted him to have hands-

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on knowledge of the technology as well as the infrastructure of the world and had set aside workshop-lab space and equipped it with the best of all the latest.

Junior's greatest tool was curiosity. He had stubbornly resolved to steal a second of Opie-time and find out what would shortly happen to Dad — and so to Junior.

Maybe Opie would tell Junior what Opie would not tell Dad. After all, who had imprinted Opie? Didn't Junior's custody of "Start" and "Stop" give Junior the right to find out if he had the right to find out?

As soon as he could after it was ready, Junior put the picklock to use. Once the seeming blank's thinness slid into the lock, transistorized feedback translated sounds of the pins into lengths and powered expansion of the shank and shaped the bit. A turn, and the door opened.

A voice behind him scared a jump out of Junior.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" But Martha gave him no time to answer or to bounce the question back: "I've always wondered what deep dark secret lurked within." She stared eagerly at the edge of light that had come on when the door cracked open.

Junior grew masterful. "I'll show you."

"Maybe you shouldn't?"

"No, it's all right." He flung the door wide.

Her gaze slid almost unseeingly over the phone and lit on Thunderburst III. She squeezed past Junior and ran her hands over and around the machine in awe. "Can *you* work this, Junior?"

"Sure."

"Really? You're not just saying that to impress me?"

Junior grew more masterful. "I'll show you."

"That's not necessary, Junior. She'll take your word. Or if not yours, mine. Won't you, Martha?" Dad, moving in on them, looked under strain, with resignation under the strain. With a gesture he stopped Martha from speaking. "Don't explain, Martha. I will. Junior, our lovely Martha's an industrial spy. That's right, Martha, I know. Before you came to live here I knew."

Martha stared. "Then why —?"

Dad smiled a tight smile. "I thought it would be fun to, and you had just the right qualifications, and anyway *it had to be.*" He hurried past that. "I didn't realize how I'd come to —" He hurried past that too. "She works for Bo Bourseul."

Junior had heard the name before. Sure; Bourseul headed a multinational corporation, nominally a rival of Dad's holding company but — whether Bourseul knew it or not — really only one of Dad's holdings.

Dad looked at Martha it seemed sadly. "Too bad for Bo it took you all this time to make it here to the very edge of the deep dark secret only to

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have it all go for nothing."

Martha lowered her eyes, but not before Junior saw a glint of triumph in them. She spoke in sullen scorn. "You know everything, don't you?"

"Not quite everything. I don't know how much Bo paid you or promised you. I do know you blew a hell of a lot more. You could've had the world."

She looked up at him and he returned her gaze unblinking. Her glance flickered toward Thunderburst III and she seemed about to speak. But she veiled her eyes again and remained silent.

Dad sighed. "Never mind. What had to be had to be."

He took her hand. She tensed, then returned pressure and let him hold it. He turned it over and pretended to read her palm.

"After you leave here, Martha, I can see the gossip columns linking your name with Bo Bourseul's. 'Woman who knew mystery tycoon turns to rival mogul.' But Bo dumps you too and you go back to your hometown. Now, about your life line —"

She snatched her hand away.

Dad's eyes were memorial candles. "Okay, Martha, take one last good look around. Print it in your memory to tell Bo."

Disdaining the look, Martha stepped out of the compartment. Dad locked the door and withdrew the picklock. He eyed the picklock admiringly.

"Bo provide you with this? Neat device. To say nothing of the accomplishment of smuggling it in. Give him my compliments." He snapped it in two and pocketed the two.

Martha glanced at Junior but said nothing.

Junior topped off his air supply. "Dad, the key's mine. I made it."

Dad smiled. "Nice try, Junior. Anyway, the point is she had no right to be here. Everyone on the staff knows this room is off limits, verboten, taboo." He rubbed his face. "Maybe I should've grown a blue beard." He looked at Martha and nodded toward the hall.

She glanced at Junior stone-faced, a flicker in her eyes and a twitch in her cheek, then vanished from his life — if you don't count memory in.

When Junior woke up the next morning and shook off the night and went down to breakfast, he found Martha already gone. Members of the staff broke off talking when he showed. They looked as if they'd like to ask him questions but knew better than to.

Dad showed up late, just as Junior was finishing. He hadn't slept much either and had as little appetite and as small desire for small talk. He motioned Junior to wait, and after a cup of Kofi-Plus he beckoned Junior to follow and led the way to Opie's compartment.

He opened the door with the key on the chain around his neck. He gestured silence. He felt around Thunder-

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burst III. He brightened darkly and showed Junior a bug he had plucked from under the console. He dropped it in a stasis box he drew from his pocket.

"Okay, now we can talk without Bourseul getting an earful. What were you going to ask Opie or Thunderburst III last night?"

"Nothing."

"It's all right, son. Speak up. I'll let you ask whatever you want."

"I said nothing."

"So be it. Remember, though, the offer stands. Only come to me first." He ruffled Junior's hair. "That *was* your picklock, you little bastard. I found traces in your workshop." He stepped back and looked Junior over. "You're not such a little bastard any more."

He sighed, then grew brisk. "You're old enough to program yourself. From now on you're on your own with the teaching machine. You can follow up whatever interests you, and you can go your own pace. If you're worrying about yourself, let me tell you that you'll do all right as far as I can make out. It'll be a long life; I haven't seen your death."

Dad uncomfortably spoke words of comfort. "The best thing to wish for in life is that death take you at a moment of great joy." He looked gloomy. He started and shook Junior's shoulder. "Are you listening to me?"

Junior gave Dad glare for glare. Everything had gone in one ear, spun around in his skull, and shot out the other. "I didn't want Martha to go."

Dad tapped the stasis box with the bug in it. "This is what your Martha would've done to us."

"I don't care."

There was a hard edge to Dad's voice. "Look, Junior, don't think you can get snotty just because you feel you're indispensable. I have your voice on tape saying 'Start' and 'Stop' and I can use that if I have to. Now let's lock up and get the hell out of here."

Though of course they had to get the hell out before they could lock up.

Dad beefed up his pr(i)vate force — "pr(i)vate" had become the short way of expressing "private investigator," but the rubric covered security guards — and stepped up his electronic defenses. But it was the one that negated the other.

The way Junior later pieced it together, a traitorous pr(i)vate switched the barrier off. A loyal pr(i)vate gunned the fifth columnist down, but by then it was too late. The enemy had synchronized the land-air attack with the deed and had gained footholds on the compound.

The old sergeant of pr(i)vates shook Junior awake. That's when Junior knew the bleeps and zaps were not in his dream.

"Head for the bunker, Junior, and dog yourself in."

"Where's Dad?"

"Helping stand them off." The ser-

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geant shoved Junior toward the bunker and dashed back to the fray.

The snap-crackle-pop intensified and the smell of ozone thickened.

Junior ran into no one, made it safely to the bunker. As he pressed the button for the drive to swing the massive hatch slowly shut, he looked around inside. The bunker, with its stockpiles, was good for years — in theory. In practice, it would fall to a determined enemy in days. What good were a few days with no help in sight?

He squeezed out, just escaping getting pulped. As it was, the door caught a corner of his pajama jacket. He ripped himself free and threaded his way back from the bunker. Dad had built out from Opie's compartment so that it stood now in the center of a maze. Junior knew lots of hiding places. If he found one he could stay in, a chance remained of slipping away while the enemy concentrated on cutting or blasting through into the bunker.

Making himself scarce, he holed up, darted, holed up, evaded prowling figures, blasts of light and stabs of sound, reached the room holding Opie's compartment. He slammed the door shut, breathed again, swung around. Someone was already there, had been waiting behind the door, aimed a light gun at him, dazed but not too dazed to fire.

But as the thumb flexed to press the stud, the hand relaxed, opened. The gun stuck to flesh only with sweat. Junior and Dad watched the weapon slip out of Dad's gripless hold.

"Good they got me or I would've got you." Dad slurred his words. He plucked nervelessly at a dart stuck in his shoulder. "Son, the bunker...." He leaned against the wall and slid down. He sat, nodded, slumped sideways, and lay still.

Junior pulled the dart out. He felt a flutter of pulse. He looked around helplessly, fixed on Opie's compartment, and took the key on its golden chain from around Dad's neck. He opened the partition door.

He stared at the phone. The link to Opie. Opie, so near, so far. The lost cord. Somewhere it found resolution.

No time for speedtalk. He had to real-time whatever remained of the connection, however much the waste.

"Start." His heart hammered the line hum dumb.

"Yes?"

"Opie, it's *me*. Honest."

"I know, Junior."

"You know what's happening?"

"Yes."

"What can I do for Dad?"

"Nothing. It's just tranquilizer. He winds up in a discreet mental hospital."

"Stop." Time to think. How could Opie know, when it wasn't — wouldn't be — in the papers? What else did Opie know? "Start. What will become of me?"

"Me." At first Junior thought Opie mimicked him, mocked him. Then Opie enlarged. "You'll become me."

And then Opie couldn't say any

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more. Line hum died. The connection had ended.

Junior listened. Other sounds rushed to fill the silence. Some of the attackers were mopping up in the house and elsewhere in the compound, some were already trying to crack the bunker. Junior frowned. They were going to take Dad. Opie — correction, Junior's years-from-now-self — said they were putting him away. Well, Junior would see they didn't take Dad's knowledge. He'd stop them from that. Junior moved.

He keyed Thunderburst III to commit amnesia. He glanced at the whir and blur of readout as its memory rushed to obliteration. He felt no twinge at the waste, though he knew he might regret lost foreknowledge of times to come in times to come. He already knew too much. To know that he himself would one day be at the other end of the line was more than he could yet take in, was burden enough.

Now what? Now make sure there was nothing on Dad that would help the enemy. He bent to his father. He caught a slight snoring. He smiled. He had found that out about Daddy when they camped out on their drive across the land. He pulled a wallet from the pocket of the zip smock his father had thrown on. Junior emptied the wallet in a heap.

He poked through the effects. A microstrip — it was a piezo-hologram — showed the latest listing of Dad's assets. The bottom line bugged Junior's eyes. There wasn't that much money in the world. Photos, of Junior as a baby — Junior warmed toward his younger self — of Belle, of Eulalia, of Martha — that last a blowup of a frame from her screen test. Clippings. Junior speedread them. Old clippings.

Bulletin. Gardiner Dolbear, the tycon, died last night apparently after suffering a stroke. Wall Street has it that Dolbear recently lost his fortune when he overextended himself in a proxy fight for control of IC. He is survived by his daughter, Belle D. Hockaday, and by a grandson, Sander Hockaday, Jr.

Straws for Gossipers. Is there a Losers Club in the making? It might point to that when you find Belle Dolbear, daughter of the late ruined tycoon, and Larry Varley, whom you may recall as the man who contested Sunshine Bill Meucci for the Presidency of these United States, have been seen about town cheering each other up.

Flash. Sander Hockaday, Sr., reclusive financier, has pulled off his greatest coup. The opening of sealed bids has just taken place and all mining rights on Mercury go to the Hockaday interests, which garnered the plum by bidding 423 trillion dollars, a mere 10 million above the next highest bid.

One thing more, a paired item — a

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postdated cashier's check payable to a small town's chamber of commerce and a covering letter from an anonymous well-wisher stating that the money was in support of the "America the Happy" float they were sending to Sunshine Bill's third inaugural, on condition one Martha Hubbard of that town ride it.

Junior shot his father a look. He shook his head and put check and letter back with the rest. He picked up his father's light gun and sent all his father's effects up in smoke.

Voices. He swung the gun toward the door, then lowered it and slid it away across the floor.

The voices sounded nearer. "They're not in the bunker." "Well, they have to be somewhere. Fan out." Now a woman's voice. "Junior!" A familiar voice. Eulalia's? "Where are you, darling? Come here, I want you. Damn it, Junior, answer me. Larry, you don't think...?" "No, the team had strict orders to be careful." "We'll try in here. Please stand back, sir, ma'am."

The door smashed open and a pr(i)vate wearing another family's colors jack-in-the-boxed. "Here they are, Mr. Varley."

Larry Varley strode carefully in. He carried a map of the compound: X marked Opie's compartment. His glance flicked past the Hockadays. He pointed. "Here's the inner room with the Thunderburst III."

A woman followed him in. She stared at Junior and after a second's hesitation nodded. "That's Junior." The woman was Belle. His mother. Her gaze fell on his father. "Look at the drooling idiot. Sander is obviously unfit to have custody of Junior. Now Junior owns the media, and as Junior's guardian I'm ordering all editors to put the lid on this."

Varley nodded. "It's in the boy's interest not to sensationalize his restoration to your custody."

Belle moved nearer Junior. "Junior, aren't you going to say hello to your mother?"

"Hello, mother."

"That's better. Things will be different now. You'll forget all this, you'll see."

Varley had been keying the Thunderburst III impotently and looked angry. "Damn. Hockaday must've blanked it when we attacked. Now we'll never know how he did it, built his empire."

Belle soothed him. "We don't have to know. It's there." She spotted the Opie-phone off the hook. "Is that an outside line? I hope nobody's been getting an earful." She grabbed the cord and tugged and the end in the fake box on the false wall tore away with so little resistance it almost sat her down.

She got her dignity back and began bustling Junior away.

Junior had a glimpse of them taking his father to a waiting chopper. Junior didn't know what was in the shot they gave his father to make him look so joyful when they led him away.

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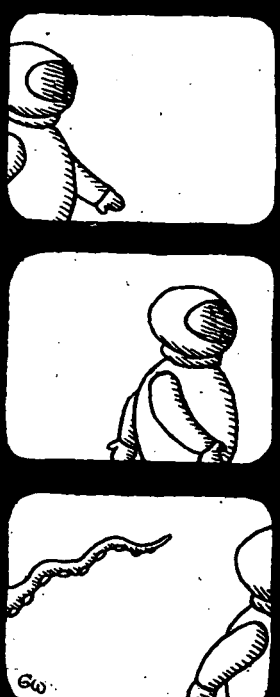
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



TRASH OF THE TITANS

Something of the silliness of *Clash of the Titans* is evident in its title; the word Titans is certainly, unequivocally plural, but early in the film, Zeus makes a point of the fact that there's only one Titan left, the Kraken. Unless schizophrenic, it's pretty hard to clash by yourself; come to think of it, he might well be schizoid, since the Kraken is a creature of Northern myth and here he is, suddenly, a Titan of Greek legend.

I'm getting pretty tired of defending Ray Harryhausen, and after this latest nonsense, I'm giving it up. (For those who don't know, Harryhausen is the doyen of the special effects creators.) Most of my positive feelings about him are based on only one film, *Jason and the Argonauts*, which retold the Argosy simply, but effectively, and in which the special effects served the plot to create a real sense of fantasy. There is a climactic battle between Jason & Co. and animate skeletons which my eye and mind absolutely believed with no question.

Since then, it's been downhill all the way. Instead of serving the plots, the special effects dominated; the films have obviously been built around them.

I had hopes for *Clash of the Titans*, both because it returned to the Greek mythology of *Jason*, and because of a distinguished cast, mostly British, playing the Olympian gods. My com-

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plaints at the title and at the fractured mythology would be mere nitpicking if the film were any fun; unfortunately, it isn't.

The basic story is that of Perseus, son of Zeus, who impregnated his mother disguised as a shower of gold. (Now *there's* a special effect I'd like to have seen, but we weren't shown it.)

Perseus grows up to be the usual strong, handsome, brave, dumb hero who decides he has a Destiny. Transported to Phoenicia by Zeus, he falls in love with the Princess Andromeda, who seems to be asleep most of the time because of a curse laid down by the villain, son of a sea nymph. From there on it's one quest after another, as Perseus has to catch Pegasus, follow Andromeda's spirit to the villain's lair, track down three witches, decapitate Medusa and use her head to petrify the Kraken as he's about to gobble up Andromeda, who has waked up long enough to fall in love with Perseus and get herself chained to a rock for her pains.

As you can see, it's an orgy of special effects, mostly critters for Perseus to fight, though there is an unbearably cute mechanical owl, whipped up by Hephaestus for Athena, obviously meant to be a flying R2D2 since it communicates in clicks and beeps.

All this is alternated with scenes on Olympus, which looks like the Lincoln Memorial on the rocks. And what is truly sad is that not only is the film as a whole leaden and dull, without a moment of real imagination or fantasy, but the effects are pretty bad throughout. Not once was my eye fooled, as with the skeletons in *Jason*. The winged horse is no better than the one in the classic *Thief of Bagdad*, and that was 40 years ago. The grotesques — Medusa, the Kraken, the son of a sea nymph — all look like rough models that move awkwardly.

It seems that special effects are very much in the eye of the beholder. There are friends of mine who have never been able to accept Harryhausen's work as reality (and I'll never forget the indignant lady who called me up to berate me for championing *2001* with all its phony-looking models). Whether through familiarity, I've gotten to that point with Harryhausen's effects, or whether the economics of filmmaking have forced him to do work inferior to the early stuff, or whether he's just lost his touch, I don't know.

A word about the cast. English actors seem to have a professional philosophy of doing anything in the way of acting as they grow older, as demonstrated by Laurence Olivier's recent career. I admire this, but it was still unnerving to see the likes of Olivier, Maggie Smith, Flora Robson, and the ravishing Claire Bloom stuck in this folderol. Not to mention Sian Phillips, the Livia of *I, Claudius*, who played Cassiopeia, but so far as I can remember, didn't sit down once in the whole movie (that's an astronomy joke).

The trend to fantasy continues in

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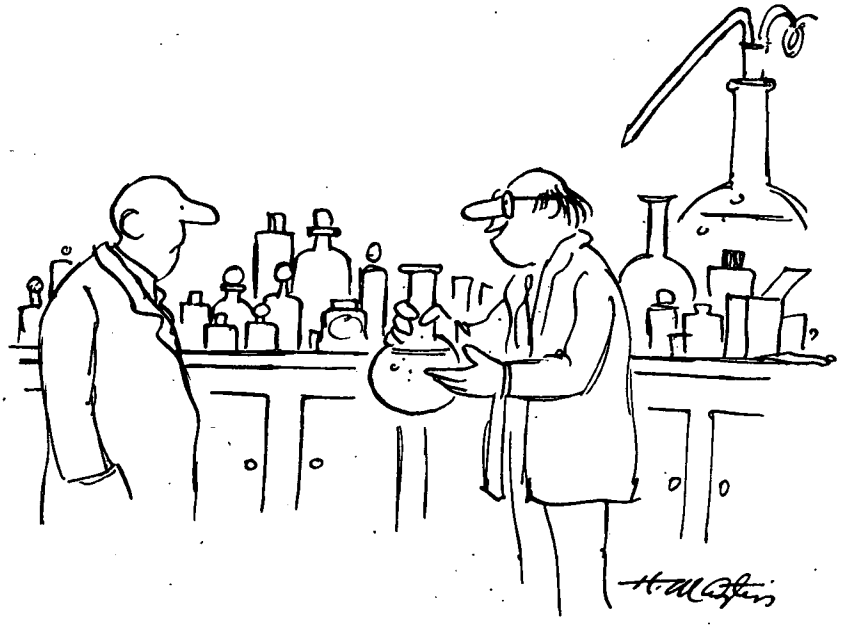
the mass media. *Clash of the Titans* demonstrates that past expertise in effects is no guarantee of *good* fantasy.

VCR Dept ... Some recently released films on videocassette:

War of the Worlds, George Pal's golden oldie version of the H.G. Wells novel. Standard '50s fare of the paranoia period, most of the effects being the destruction of humanity and its works. The alien artifacts are very neat, indeed, visually and aurally.

Time After Time. H.G. Wells again, this time as hero, gallivanting off in his time machine to save the future (Now) from Jack, the Ripper. Some amusing and suspenseful moments, but I don't think would hold up to repeated showings.

Rosemary's Baby, the grand-daddy of all the demonic possession films, and oh, so expertly made that it's still the best.



"This is a mixture of everything we have in the lab. I haven't done this since I was a kid monkeying around with my Gilbert Junior Chemistry set."

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This mordant tale about Ludwig Gryzbek and his reluctant trip into the past comes to us from a 34-year-old Canadian who teaches English in a Toronto secondary school. Mr. Green has had SF stories published in Australian and Canadian anthologies.

Till Death Do Us Part

BY
TERENCE M. GREEN

Ludwig Gryzbek depressed the button on the can of Raid Wasp and Hornet Aerosol Spray and meticulously sprayed his pants, boots, shirt, gloves, jacket and mosquito head-net, all of which were lined-up along his basement floor. He then turned each article over and repeated the process. Having overdone the dosage more than a bit, he sneezed twice, swore softly and retreated from the heavily misted area.

After waiting a minute or so, he began to dress himself in the treated garments, his anticipation rising graphically. Now I'll get those buggers, he thought, recalling the way that they had humiliated him. He had discovered the wasp nest under his front porch while trying to repair a broken slat that morning. The buggers had swarmed out at him like crazed Scramblers, managing to sting him only three times due solely to the frenzy of his retreat. Old Bonehead next door had seen it all from his front window, he remembered, and Ludwig had been equally furious with both Bonehead's derision and the mindless wasps that were assailing him.

This was to be Ludwig's revenge.

Mounting the basement steps invulnerably, tin of Raid held at the ready, he fantasized about the approaching conquest. He pictured the wasps writhing in torment on the ground, tails twitching spasmodically as they stung themselves to death.

Or was that scorpions?

Nevertheless, thinking this, he felt good.

Ludwig crawled under the porch on his belly, turned over on his back and looked up. The wasps appeared to be confused at the smell he radiated, three or four of them disappearing into the

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nest while a few others droned away in various directions. Ludwig smiled. Then he pressed the nozzle into the opening and let it fly.

The hissing sound was wonderful; he held the nozzle down for almost a full minute until the spray had turned to a white foam and dripped back onto his glove. He then watched the wasps that could still move fall out, twitching as he had anticipated, onto the ground, in death throes.

He pretended that the nest was Bonehead's ass.

He pushed himself out from under the porch, dragging the actual nest with him. Placing it on the cement walk, he stomped it, ground it to a mush, then a paste, eradicating the larvae from the face of the earth.

Only then did he look up to see if Bonehead was watching. A curtain fell back into place in the front window.

Beneath the head-net, Ludwig smiled and headed into his condo.

After showering, infratanning and sensurrounding, Ludwig wrapped himself in his robe and went to his mailbox.

There were two letters there.

One was from the firm of Abramsky, Benevides and Hakim, Partners-in-Law. He knew what it would probably be.

The other bore no return address, but simply his name and address typed on a standard brown business-size envelope.

Goddamn, he thought. Not another one. A quick adrenalin flush caused his skin to itch, and he scratched his chest and neck in darting movements.

Son of a bitch. Whoever's sending these should be tied to a Dodger and scrambled, he thought. Bastard.

He knew that it was another of those chain-letters.

He shredded the end and yanked the folded paper out. This one read:

ST. ANTHONY CHAIN

This chain letter originated from Venezuela and was written by St. Anthony de Padua, a missionary from South America. Since then the letter must make a tour around the world. You will make 24 copies and a few days later you will receive a surprise. All are true. (Reason) Even if you are not superstitious; CONSTANTINOU DIZON *received this chain in 1988. He asked his secretary to make 24 copies and he sent them out. A few days later he won a lottery of 2 million in his country. Carlos Brands and his office employees received this letter in 1995, forgot it and lost it. A few days later he lost his job. Dario Castillo received this but did not believe in it. He threw it away. 9 days later he died for no reason. Whatsoever happens this must not be broken. Make 24 copies and send them to anyone in 9 days. Gren Dans, a student in 2021, received this chain and made 24 copies but did not send them to any of his friends. Instead he left one in each vehicle he was riding in. After 6 months he was employed*

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and a week later he was in an accident that burned 50% of his body, from the waist on up to his face. He passed away a wrinkled old man. If you send this chain letter in 9 days you will receive a surprise.

INANG LAGING SAKOLO (MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP) tulungan mo po kaming mag-anak. Islalin po ito sa kaibigan. Tayong lahat ay manalangin para ng 10 araw Huwag biruin o pag tawanan baka mangyari as inyo.

1. *Si Mrs. Velasceo tumaas ang sweldo matapos matanggap ito.*
2. *Si Mrs. Reyes ng Baguio naging maayos ng matanggap ito.*
3. *Si Mrs. Buenaventura matapos matanggap ito, pinagtwanan ngunit namatay noog ika-9 ng Agosto, 2019.*

Huwag ninyong pagtagaling ng 10 araw at nay biyayang matatmasa. INANG LAGING SAKLOLO. Huwang sana ninyong ipagwalang, bahala ito laging manalangin at magdasil.

Salamat Po.

What horseshit, Ludwig thought, completely and thoroughly irritated by the letter. Now I'm supposed to wander around wondering if my ass will get squeezed into a vice 10 days from now and I'll have to spend the rest of my goddamn life bent over making friends with my shins. Jesus Christ.

Who sent this? he wondered — as he always did. Who had sent the other dozen he'd received in the last year?

And what the hell was that at the bottom of the letter? Another language? Or made-up gibberish? Ludwig didn't know, and his ire rose in direct proportion to his linguistic myopia.

They drove him crazy. A few times he had gotten so nervous, anxious, frustrated or whatever, that he had actually sent off copies as instructed!

It was outrageous.

Probability: you sent them, you were a fool; you did not send them, you might be a fool.

You couldn't win.

Why me? he asked. Who do I know who's as nutty as three fruitcakes?

He had always suspected the Bonehead next door. The Bonehead never worked — had some kind of disability pension due to a psychological disorder of some sort — or so the rumour went at the condo laundry room. Just stayed home all day watching video, playing with his holo. Sure, everybody knew he was nutty as a peanut farm. Probably a transvestite too, Ludwig was certain.

It had to be him, he thought.

He crumpled the letter viciously into a ball, the cords in his neck straining, a vein in his temple pulsing. Then he thought better of it. Burned from the waist to the face did it say? Jesus.

Instead of hurling it away, he put it in the pocket of his robe. Temporarily, he told himself.

Now this other letter — ah, yes, let's see now.

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Ludwig Gryzbek, his hair prematurely white, was 52 years old and had thus been fully pensioned two years ago. He had not worked out a leisure activity suitable to his inclinations and lack of talents as of yet; mostly, he diddled away time keeping his condo unit from complete entropy. If it was not a broken slat in the porch, it was a washer in the sink or a drain that would not drain or an intercom that would not com. He had been an accountant all his life at the Imperial Bank of Commerce downtown, and when he could not account for something, when the balance sheet would not balance, then he experienced the sufferings of Job. It was his personal fate to live in an imperfect world surrounded by idiots — and the occasional Bonehead.

He had been married once — for 8 years — to Joan. He had a son, Stephen, but Joan had taken Stephen when she left him. Stephen was 7. Stephen would be 24 — no, 25, he corrected himself — now, and from all reports was doing quite well for himself with a local Arab rug importer. Joan had remarried, survived her new husband, and acquired a very great wealth through her more recently betrothed's untimely departure.

But fate had struck again. Fate was something Ludwig felt he grasped dimly.

Joan had died herself 3 months ago. Her Dart had collided with a Dodger. She had been instantly blimmed.

That was what the letter was about.

Stephen and Ludwig had been named as beneficiaries.

Ludwig had found it truly amazing when he had first been contacted by the lawyers; for the fact was that he and Joan simply hated one another.

The letter from the firm of Abramsky, Benevides and Hakim informed him succinctly that the will would be viewed officially on Wednesday at 3 PM in their offices. His presence was requested.

Today was Friday.

Ludwig wondered agian, for the thousandth time: why would Joan leave me anything?

He could not fathom it.

Wednesday it was, then. He would be there.

At least it was heartening to know that old Joan was dead. Joan and the wasps.

On Wednesday, just before heading off to the firm of Abramsky, Benevides and Hakim, Ludwig went into the kitchen to consult with Cottontail about the weather.

"Well, Cottontail, you silly blimmer, how's it look?"

Benignly, as ever, seated on the soiled pink souvenir cushion in the corner of his cage, Cottontail replied: "Mainly clear tonight ... low near 17 ... Thursday, mostly cloudy with a few

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showers or thunderstorms, high near 28 ... outlook for Friday, sunny with cloudy periods ... chance of afternoon showers...."

"Sure, sure, you pointed-eared fuzzball. Only one I can count on's you. Right? Right."

Ludwig flicked his knuckle against Cottontail's cage, startling the alien as always. Then he proceeded to don his roller skates for the trip downtown.

Ludwig had bought the pet Arcturan shortly after Joan had left. He had taught him a whole series of weather reports and forecasts during the first few months that he had had him, merely to amuse himself.

He had never taught him anything else.

Thus, as the months, then the years went by, Cottontail, when prompted, would spout perfectly phrased, totally random and irrelevant weather forecasts.

It was, in fact, a cool autumn.

Ludwig had decided that that was all he was willing to listen to from anyone else with whom he chose to live. Ever. Once burned, twice shy, he thought. Christ. Joan had left her mark, that was certain. or was it her hoofprint?

He chuckled to himself at the spontaneous witticism.

Joan had probably discovered how to bottle leprosy, he thought, and had left him a dozen cases in her will.

What else could it possibly be?

Ludwig met Stephen at the roller-skate rack outside the building where they were both locking their skates.

"Stephen."

"Hi, Dad."

They shook hands. Ludwig also gripped his son's shoulder with his left hand, which meant reaching up, since the young man was so much taller than he. Tanned and blond too. So unlike either of them.

"It's good to see you. It really is."

"Good to see you too, Dad. Time stretches out, doesn't it?"

"Doesn't it."

Ludwig looked at his son, looked him up and down, and felt moved. His son was the only thing that had ever been able to move him, even slightly. It was a feeling Ludwig could never grasp, and he never failed to be amazed when it occurred. Yes, he thought, this is probably the only decent thing that ever happened to me. That I ever did. Having Stephen. And even it had been unplanned.

"Anything new?"

"No, nothing much. Life goes on. Had a terrible head cold for a couple of weeks, but it's gone now."

"Buggers, aren't they?"

"Yeah. How about yourself? How's retirement treating you?"

"I keep busy. You know. This and that."

"Yeah. Yeah."

"We should go out to dinner sometime. Talk a bit. Tell me about your girlfriends."

Stephen laughed.

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"How they're crazy for you."

They smiled as they walked to the el.

"Was awful about Mom, eh?"

Ludwig did not answer. He had not gone to the funeral service. He had not given a damn, other than a kind of sweet bitterness that summed up his hate, his resentment at her eventual fortune. Joan, he was convinced, was truly a shrew — all of which made Stephen more of a miracle than ever.

It was Hakim, the junior partner, who was seated with them in his office; the three of them were watching the monitor awaiting Joan's visage for the reading of the video-will, the supplement to the written document that Hakim held folded in his left hand.

Joan's face appeared. This portion of the will had been made within the last 5 years, when her second husband's demise had necessitated an alteration.

Joan's hair had grayed, her mouth had become more pinched, Ludwig thought. She looked old. The flesh of her face had become whiter, softer, more unhealthy looking.

"Well," she began casually, "if you're watching this, then I've probably been dead for some months now. What a thought. These gentleman taping me here tell me that this will be viewed by an attorney and my beneficiaries. So I'm talking to you, Stephen, and to you, Ludwig."

She was dressed in a navy-blue suit and white blouse, Ludwig noted. Probably starched the collar too much, as usual. Probably killed off her second husband slowly that way. Starched the poor bugger to death.

"Stephen — I will address you first. You have always made me proud, and I feel I have loved you as best I could."

Ludwig snorted.

"You have displayed good sense in all serious ventures, and I know I can trust you with my estate. Your stepfather, Dominic, was a very wealthy and astute man, and I have been fortunate enough to become a wealthy woman, and you shall now become a wealthy man."

She paused for effect. Ludwig wondered if she had run through this several times, getting it just right for her theatrical sense of the dramatic. He was sure that she had.

"My estate is worth somewhere in the neighborhood of 8 million Swiss francs, or about 4 million Canadian dollars. It has all been set up in trust funds for you, Stephen, with the exception of a minor bequest to Ludwig, which will come from the estate.

"And, Ludwig," her tone, remarkably, remained even. "I leave you one hundred thousand Swiss francs, or 50 thousand Canadian dollars..."

Jesus, not bad, thought Ludwig, his mind racing ahead. I could move, get out of where I'm stuck...

"...on the condition that you use whatever portion of that sum that is necessary to visit me via the deBorja

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Chronoline sometime shortly before my death."

Ludwig had frozen. He had stopped breathing. He could not believe what he was hearing. But he was not missing a word.

"If you refuse to do this — that is, pay for the Chronoline visitation from the bequeathed sum, then the entire sum will revert to the remainder of the estate that is Stephen's.

"And, Stephen," Joan continued, "no part of your estate is to be given to Ludwig for any reason. If, at any time over the next 35 years, the executors of the trusts have reason to believe, through their varied channels of investigation, that any of my funds have found their way into Ludwig's hands, then all remaining funds will henceforth be diverted to the deBorja Institute for Time Research."

Ludwig was livid.

Stephen and Hakim were perplexed and embarrassed.

"The written legalese for all this is in the hands of my attorneys.

"And that is all I have to say.

"Good-bye."

Joan, blue suit, white blouse, starched collar, faded back into death.

The three men were momentarily speechless.

I was right, Ludwig thought.

Bottled leprosy.

Ludwig used the inside roller-lanes on his trip home. Busier people skitted by him to his left. He had much to think about.

The deBorja Chronoline was the real thing — no toy or gimmick. Expensive as hell. Common knowledge that a ride on the Chronoline cost about 40 thousand Canadian.

That leaves me a pittance, he thought. Joan is a bitch. Here, look! she says. Then spins you and takes it away.

Bitch.

Goddamned if I'll do it, he thought. Wouldn't give her the satisfaction. For 10 thousand Canadian net, I'm to spend 5 minutes with Joan sometime in the past 2 years.

Unbelievable.

The whole thing boggled him, infuriated him.

Joan was playing games with him, even from the grave. She certainly was relentless, he thought. That was a good word for her: relentless. Old relentless Joan. Up her blimmer.

I'm the one who's alive, Joan. Your money can't do *that* for you, can it?

Roll over, Joanie dear, and go to sleep. Forget about old Ludwig. I'm finally rid of you.

You'll never see me again, he concluded — if "again" could apply to the past.

He lengthened his stride.

Two days later he contacted the lawyers and the deBorja Chronoline people to inform them that he would do it.

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It was not that Ludwig wanted or needed Joan's money. It was simply that he was so curious about her reasons for the demanded visitation that he could not stand not knowing any longer. He had not slept for two nights.

It was driving him crazy.

Old Joan.

Five minutes with Joan. What a price to pay to sleep nights, he thought.

The Chronoline operator was a small, wiry man, with a bushy black mustache, large grey plastic glasses, and a balding pate.

"You understand, Mr. Gryzbek, that the law requires that I read this to you and confirm via videotape that you understand all that you have heard. It's a formality."

"I understand."

"Right, then." The little man held the plastic-laminated sheet to one side to offset the reflective glare from the ceiling lights. He pressed the record button on the VTR and gave Ludwig a duplicate copy to peruse.

He began: "All those who consent to lease the use of the deBorja Chronoline do so with full preknowledge of and consent to the following:

(a) At this time, the limiting range of the Chronoline is 2 years from the present date. No earlier time periods can be reached.

(b) The Chronoline projects you back in time in a holographic form only. You will not be physically present there; thus, no physical interaction of any kind, other than speech, can occur.

(c) Maximum time limit that the projection can be maintained is 5 minutes.

(d) No alteration of past or present events is possible, as has been determined through extensive testing. Visitors must, therefore, expect only social results, or knowledge for its own sake — not political or economic results.

(e) Any attempts to circumvent (d) are subject to prosecution under Article V, Section 2, of the Time Research Act of 2017.

"All conversations are recorded and fed into the central Credit and Macrovac Computers. Any attempts to profit personally or otherwise distort the economic/political fabric of the present for personal reasons will subject all participants to prosecution and imprisonment.

"Furthermore, deBorja Chronoline assumes no responsibility or liability in the event of accident or death during or as a result of a Chronoline ride."

The little man looked up perfunctorily. "Are there any questions, Mr. Gryzbek?"

"No."

"You understand all that I have read fully and agree to abide by it?"

"Yes."

"Fine." He switched off the VTR.

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"You understand, of course, the legal necessity of such a record?"

"Yes. I do."

"There have been no problems since the restrictions of the Act put a stop to early attempts to manipulate finances and investments. And the Chronoline is perfectly safe. Accident-free record."

"I know."

"Well, then, I guess that's it."

"I guess so."

"Come with me."

Ludwig was ushered into the Chronoline room. It was powder-blue, empty, except for a brown leather sofa, centered beneath and in the middle of where the ceiling and wall beams would focus. There was also a hollow echo-effect, Ludwig noticed.

"Be seated, please, Mr. Gryzbek."

Ludwig walked over to the sofa, looked up, around, down. Then he seated himself, crossing his legs and folding his arms.

"See you in five minutes, Mr. Gryzbek. Have a good visit."

He left to operate the projecting beams in the adjoining room.

Ludwig waited, a veritable mosaic of emotions. I'm here, he thought. Going to see Joan.

They were right, he thought. I feel nothing. My body is apparently seated back in the Chronoline room, entranced on the sofa. Yet I am here, immaterial, holographic, a shimmering ghost-like projection.

Ludwig had selected an evening one year previous to the present date; he had been programmed to appear via the Chronoline's time-space co-ordinates at 11 PM in Joan's bedroom. If Joan was not present at that time and place, he would be re-programmed, without further charge, until his visitation was accomplished.

Joan was there.

She was sitting in bed reading. Ludwig had known her habits well.

She lowered her book to her lap and gazed firmly at the holographic projection that was Ludwig Gryzbek; she seemed to assess the whole situation, grasping its significance. Her mouth pinched smaller, her eyes narrowed.

"Hello, Ludwig," she said.

"What did you want of me, Joan?"

"So, I'm dead in your time, am I? I die sometime in the next two years. So soon. Nothing works out as we would have it, does it?"

"You've been dead for about 30 years, Joan. You just finally made it official. What is it that you wanted to say to me?"

"Two years. So soon."

Ludwig was silent for a few seconds. Then he tried again. "You wrote, the will, Joan. What's it all about?"

"How do I die, Ludwig? You know I can do nothing about it, anymore than you already know what transpired in this visitation. For some reason the time paradoxes of fiction just aren't there. Must be because one does

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not actually physically transport to the past," she mused, "but only gets bizarrely projected. Not true time-travel, is it? Never had the urge to Ride myself. Should try it...."

Joan had trailed away into the recesses of her thoughts. She seemed suddenly to remember her original.

"How do I die?" she asked again.

"You're stampeded to death by a herd of dopers at a one-half price sale at the Drug Mart Center at Thorncliffe Plaza."

"Ah, Ludwig ... so bitter — after all this time...."

"You're boiled and shrunk and stretched and used as the skin of a North American League soccer ball. The Blizzard play an exhibition game with the Aztecs, and nine goals are scored with you."

"Ludwig, Ludwig..." she sighed.

"Actually, Joan, you slip and fall into the path of a band of evening High Rollers, in the fast lane, and are skated to death by hundreds of tiny wheels. Little boys eventually carve their initials in you, since your remains become indistinguishable from the bland color of the roller pavement."

"...you always were a moron, totally lacking in sensitivity. An intellectual vacuum."

"Yeah. And I suppose you were a brain surgeon."

"If I had been, Ludwig, yours is the first I'd have treated. Lobotomized, rather."

It was happening again, Ludwig thought. Nothing changed, ever. He and Joan could not stay in the same room without going for each other's throats.

"Why did you request this visitation as a condition of the will?"

"Why would I want to see you again, you mean? Why leave you even the pittance of the 20 thousand Swiss francs net? These are stymieing questions for your little mind, aren't they, Ludwig?"

The holographs shimmered, wavered, steadied.

Fuck her, Ludwig thought, I don't need this. Let her talk. I'll just wait it out. I've fulfilled the condition. Maybe I'll buy a new Scrambler or Ecorecliner with the rest of the money.

"Remember, Ludwig, how you claimed once that the only reason one person would ever live with another was for sexual convenience? That was the only reason one person would ever cohabit with another, you said. I don't want to live with my cook, my friend, my brother, my mother, you said. If I'm living with someone, I'm going to get laid! Often! Here! Now! Always!

"That was the beginning of my disgust for you, Ludwig. That was when I realized the full measure of my contempt. That, and when you told my mother that I had known for years that I was adopted, in spite of her attempts to keep it from me, and laughed at her for not knowing that I knew. She interpreted your laughter as mine too, which it wasn't, and our relationship

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was never the same."

Ludwig could stay silent no longer. "So what are we going to do, Joanie dear? Have every fight all over again? *I'm* alive. *You're* dead. It's all over for you. Stick *that* in your blim and swill it."

Almost as though she had not heard him, she continued. "And there was the time you sat Stephen down at the table, put an empty plate in front of him. He was only five years old. Your mother, you said, she says there's a God. She says you should pray to God. Well, pray for food, you said. The poor child was speechless. Go ahead, pray to God, you screamed.

"Now, ask *me* for food, says the omnipotent provider to the five-year-old impressionable child, and proceeds to fill his plate for him. Stephen cried for days. And all that because you objected to my religious convictions."

"Those weren't religious convictions," Ludwig countered, "they were whacko beliefs. Goes to a bloody drive-in church, drops dollars in the Robo-Altar Boy and the Dodger fills with doped incense and squirrely music. Chanting in tongues. What shit. And my son was exposed to this! You were nuts, Joanie, pure and simple nuts."

"You're a moron, Ludwig. A pure and simple moron. But's that not, as they say, why you're here today...."

Ludwig was silent now, alert.

Joan enjoyed the power of his sudden submission.

"Money is power, you know, Ludwig. By having you visit me here and now in this way, I can tell you things that I would never have told you in person. Or while I was alive. You're much too violent. I consider this my ultimate revenge."

Ludwig said nothing.

"How could I make you miserable, if I was dead and unable to enjoy my wealth? This was a puzzle for me to work out the last few years. After all, I owe you years of misery."

Ludwig began to interject, held back.

"You are a moron, you know, Ludwig."

"And you're nuts." He could not hold back.

"You're such a moron that the obvious has eluded you for years. I wanted to tell you, within the safe restrictions of the Chronoline experience, that Stephen is not your son."

Ludwig was stricken.

"You could never have fathered anything as fine as that boy."

His mind reeled, struggled, flooded.

"I had many lovers, real men. One especially fine man fathered Stephen. He's not yours. He's too good, too normal. You're a cretin...."

Ludwig could scarcely hear her. The blood thundered in his temples; he felt faint. His ears were ringing.

"You were too dull, Ludwig, even to be unfaithful to me...."

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The one thing I love, am proud of, he thought.

He began to focus once more on Joan. "You're demonic," he said hoarsely. His eyes dilated, his teeth were bared.

"And as for my religious convictions, Ludwig — I'm fully aware of your own phobias and superstitions, in spite of all claims to disbelief you may proffer. And to avail myself of the opportunity to exploit your neuroses, I have only recently sent your name to a number of individuals with whom I correspond. I trust that your appearance on mailing lists is growing geometrically, and that every time you receive a chain-letter in future, you will think of me. And you will answer them, Ludwig, for if you don't, something horrible will befall you — just as today has befallen you for ignoring so many that you have received already."

Ludwig was pale, wound like a tight spring. His muscles were knotted; his head and back began to ache dully.

"I believe, dear, that our time is about up," said Joan, consulting her watch. "In your time my life is over. You do not exist for me anymore. I have hurled the last spears and will exist in your mind as long as you live. I wonder how long you've got, Ludwig? Control your blood pressure. I always did believe it was your weak point."

"You're a fucking bitch, Joan."

"Perhaps. But you, Ludwig, are a moron."

They did not speak again.

Thirty seconds later, Ludwig faded back to the present.

Prostrate in his new Ecorecliner, Ludwig was sealing the last of the 24 copies of the letter from Salamat Po. He would post them later in the day.

The wasps, he had noted that morning, were relocating under the condo's back eave. As he extracted the can of Raid from the hall cupboard and headed for the basement, he paused by Cottontail's cage in the kitchen.

"Well, you silly old blimmer, what's on the horizon?"

"Hazy and humid tonight and Sunday," the Arcturan droned, "occasional showers developing late..."

Ludwig snapped his knuckle against the alien's cage, startling and silencing him.

Cottontail settled his behind onto his soiled pink souvenir cushion.

"Yeah, yeah. Sure. Right. Hazy and humid."

Thinking of the Bonehead next door, Ludwig descended the stairs.

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Juleen Brantingham says that she is married, has three children and temporarily resides in New York state. She has had stories published in Asimov's *and in the anthology SHADOWS, and here offers a tale about Felly, a rag doll that exerts a strange influence on its owner.*

Felly

BY

JULEEN BRANTINGHAM

"My mother didn't raise me to be a mother," Lisa used to apologize/boast whenever something went wrong.

It was all right the first few years, up to six months ago, in fact. It was all right because George was there, steady, reliable George, who, though she'd never said it out loud because he would have taken it as an insult, was very good at all the things she thought of as maternal. He could put a diaper on so snugly that it wasn't down around the baby's ankles five minutes later. He could walk the floor with Vicky all night when she was teething or colicky and never raise his voice or toss her into the crib and tell her to cry it out. When she was a little older, it was George who could make her smile again after someone had hurt her feelings. It was George who had made her understand why she mustn't steal another child's toys or hit someone with her sand shovel. Lisa always had such good intentions when she sat down to talk to their daughter, but Vicky's eternal "Why, Mommy, why?" would push her to the point where she'd wind up screaming, "Because you can't, that's all! If I catch you doing it again I'll blister your bottom!" Not that she ever would, of course. Punishment was another thing she left up to George.

But George wasn't around any more. Her fault. He'd been a good husband, even if he was slightly stuffy; but when their daughter began to show that streak of independence, George tried to bring her back into line, and Lisa egged her on. She herself had been an agreeable child, always trying to please others, and it had taken her a long time to get over *that*. Vicky decided early on that no one was going to

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push her around merely because he happened to be bigger, stronger, and older.

The day Vicky decided she was too old to be spanked was one the three of them would never forget. When he'd bent her over his knees to punish her for cutting all her dresses to shreds, she'd wet herself, and him. He'd gone to a bar that night and got stinking drunk, but he never raised a hand to her again.

Lisa had been delighted at his failure to quell the girl's spirit, and she'd made no secret of it. There had been other incidents. One day George decided he'd had enough of both of them. He'd packed up and moved out.

That, in a way, was regrettable because they loved him. They really did.

Until six months ago Vicky had lived for Saturday afternoons when George would come to take her out for a few hours. Lisa had always invited him to stay for dinner afterwards. One hour a week they pretended to be a normal family — that was about as long as Lisa and Vicky could keep it up anyway.

It was the perfect arrangement for the two of them, but Lisa had known it couldn't last. George wanted the real thing seven days a week and he finally found it. A widow with two perfect, well-behaved children. George had tried for a while to include Vicky in his new family circle, at least on Saturday afternoons, but Vicky had put a stop to that. She told him one day that she wasn't going to spend any more time with white bunnies. George hadn't understood. After she'd stormed off to her bedroom, he told Lisa, shaking his head, they didn't keep pets, where could she have gotten an idea like that?

Lisa said she'd get it straightened out, that she'd call when Vicky was ready to see him again. That was six months ago. George must still be waiting for her call. Vicky seemed to have forgotten she'd ever had a father.

They were muddling through without him. Lisa hadn't changed. She still had no maternal feelings, but by treating Vicky as she would wish to be treated herself, there had been no *major* clashes. Plenty of minor ones, of course.

"Vicky, where did you get this?" *This* was a sort of doll, a green golliwog, body made out of knitted material like a sock, limbs grotesquely long, black button eyes, fat red lips of felt that managed somehow to look wet. Lisa almost shuddered as she picked it up off the floor and held it out to her daughter.

"Outside," Vicky said, eyes still glued to the television.

"Who does it belong to?"

"Don't know."

"You find out tomorrow, you hear me? It doesn't belong to you and you can't keep it."

"Okay."

However, that was only prelude. Lisa didn't see the golliwog again for several days. So she didn't give it

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another thought. There were other things to think about: problems at the lab where she worked, an oil bill that *had* to have one too many zeros in it, a note from Vicky's teacher.

"Not again! What is she upset about this time?"

"Maybe you're getting bent out of shape over nothing. Maybe she just wants to invite you to the P.T.A. dinner."

"*Is* that why she's writing this time?"

An impish grin. "I'm afraid not."

George would have started scolding immediately, but Lisa felt an answering smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. When *she* had been in the fourth grade, she'd been terrified of doing anything to upset her teacher. The feeling had lasted until her second semester of college when she realized that was the reason she'd come out of high school with good grades and no education to speak of. Vicky wouldn't take anyone's word about anything. She had to see the proof for herself.

"Oh, Vicky, The boys' restroom? Why?"

"I wanted to see."

"I showed you the picture in the anatomy book. Wasn't that enough?"

Vicky shook her head. "The guy in the book was a grown-up. I wanted to see if boys were different."

"So now you know. And tomorrow you're going to go back to school and tell your teacher you'll never do it again—"

"Well, of *course* not." Indignantly. "I *saw* all there was to see."

"—and that you're sorry you did it."

"Mom!" She turned it into three syllables. "Mrs. Tanner is a silly fusspot. You should have heard her — 'You're a sick little girl with a filthy, *filthy* mind—' Jeez! Just because I wanted to look!"

"I know. She wrote the same thing in her note." Lisa's own morals had also been mentioned. Some women still lived in the Dark Ages, not only afraid of independence but afraid of women who had it.

"Well, then. You know I'm not sick."

"Of course not." A sense of caution kept her from stating her opinion of Mrs. Tanner. Next time Vicky got into trouble — and there *would* be a next time — she would remember that and use it, making things worse. "But you're going to apologize to Mrs. Tanner and make her believe you mean it."

That lead to a long, involved argument, as Lisa had known it would. She didn't have enough patience to be a mother, no talent for making her daughter see just what she had to do to get along in this world. In the end she had to resort to a threat. If Vicky didn't apologize, she wouldn't be allowed to go to the motorcycle races on Saturday. Lisa won with that but Vicky sulked for the rest of the evening.

Vicky apologized to her teacher.

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The problems at the lab weren't solved, but they were shifted around so they looked like new problems. The oil company proved they'd put the right number of zeros on the bill. And Saturday rolled around.

Lisa had to roust her out of bed. "Come on, kid. Housework before races. You take the back of the house and I'll take the front?"

"Yucch! *You* take the back. I did the bathroom last week."

Lisa abhorred housework, but one thing she had managed to teach Vicky was that neat habits made for less work at chore time. Vicky's bedroom was usually no more of a problem to clean than Lisa's own. But out of habit, she got down to check under the bed. When she'd been Vicky's age, it had been easier to give her socks and underwear a good kick than to carry them to the hamper. And this time—

Lisa crawled as far under as she could and managed to snag the dark lump that was lurking there. When she brought it out into the light, she shuddered and almost dropped it. That green golliwog again.

"Vicky! Come here right *now!*"

She heard the vacuum cleaner being turned off, the impatient sigh, the heavy footsteps. "What is it? I'm never going to get my part done if you keep stopping me."

"This," Lisa said, holding it out to her, holding it by one leg so it flopped. "I thought I told you to find out who it belonged to and give it back."

"I forgot. I'll do it tomorrow."

"You'll do it right now!"

Vicky marched over and snatched the thing out of her hand. "All right, I'll do it now. Jeez, you're making such a big deal out of it. It's just a dumb old doll."

I am, Lisa agreed silently and shamefully as Vicky left the house. Why am I so upset? It's just an old rag doll that she picked up at a friend's house and forgot to give back. The way I'm carrying on about it—

She looked down and noticed that she was wiping her fingers on her pants leg, over and over again as if they were covered with a slimy stain. Such an *ugly* doll. Why would anyone make such a thing? Why would anyone buy it? It was like a character from a nightmare, that putrid green color, those fat, wet-looking lips. As Vicky would say, Yucch!

Vicky didn't come back for almost an hour, and when she did she still had the golliwog.

"Don't yell at me," she grumbled. "I asked everyone and they all said it didn't belong to them. It must be Jill's and they're not home. I'll take it over tomorrow."

"You could have left it in the mailbox."

"Okay, I *could* have but I didn't think of it! Do you want me to go back?"

Stop making such a big deal out of nothing, Lisa told herself. "No, just put it down somewhere. Look, I'll help

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you finish the living room, and then we'll have time to stop for a hamburger on the way to the races, okay?"

"Okay," Vicky said grudgingly, accepting the unspoken apology.

Lisa was troubled, not so much by the doll but by her own reaction to it. She *did* have strong feelings about dolls, dating from the time when George could think of no other present to give to his daughter.

"You're forcing her into a mold. You're telling her how she should behave, what she should like, what she has to do to make you love her."

"You're talking crazy. I'm just giving her presents. All little girls like dolls."

"Crap. Little girls are told they *should* like dolls. But our daughter is going to have the chance to make up her own mind."

So while George gave her dolls and tea sets and doll houses, Lisa gave her toy cars and building blocks and sports equipment. When Vicky showed a slight preference for the cars and blocks and balls, Lisa gleefully tossed out all the little-girly things.

"Her toybox isn't very big," she told George. "There's only enough room to keep the things she plays with often."

When Vicky played at a friend's house, Lisa would sometimes see her pick up a doll, cuddle it a few minutes, then toss it aside. As she grew older she even lost interest in girls who played with dolls. It was usually Vicky who led the pack of tricycle terrorists, the tree climbers, and the sandbox construction crews.

Why had she picked up that awful rag doll and brought it home? Well, the thing would be gone tomorrow. Lisa warned herself not to make a fuss about it again and give it the status of a forbidden pleasure.

Sunday morning Vicky watched television, the doll sprawled forgotten on the sofa where she had dropped it. Lisa forced herself to say nothing, but by midafternoon she couldn't stand it any more.

"Hey, brat, I'm going over to see Jill's mother. Want to come along?"

"Sure," Vicky said, scrambling up off the floor.

They were halfway out the door when Vicky stopped. "Just a minute," she said. She came back carrying the golliwog. "Bet you thought I'd forget," she said with a grin.

"It had completely slipped my mind," Lisa lied, convincing neither one of them.

Lisa had a cup of coffee with Nancy, Jill's mother, who took care of Vicky after school. When Vicky found out the boys, her usual playmates, were at a ball game with their father, she disappeared into a bedroom with Jill, a chubby little girl with blond curls. Lisa and Nancy made small talk. It was a social obligation Lisa usually neglected. When the cups were empty and she felt enough time had passed, Lisa got up, trying not to sigh with relief.

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"Come on, Vicky," She called. "We have to be going."

There was no answer from the bedroom. Lisa and Nancy walked back, commiserating with each other about children who didn't come when called.

The girls were having a tea party. On the floor, propped against the furniture were several dolls as blond and chubby as Jill. Vicky, all knobby knees and sharp elbows, was holding the golliwog on her lap. They both looked out of place.

"We have to go home now," Lisa said softly, determined not to show how startled she was.

Her daughter looked up, a distant, unreadable expression on her face. Still holding the doll, she stood up and came toward the door.

"You have Jill's doll. Give it back, dear."

Jill shook her head. "That's not mine," she said.

"Are you sure? Vicky, didn't you say you thought you picked it up here the other day when you were playing with Jill?"

Vicky didn't answer. Nancy was looking from mother to daughter as if she sensed undercurrents.

"Maybe she did," Jill said. "But it isn't mine. I found it out in the yard a while ago. I don't know where it came from and I don't want it. Ugly old thing. I like my new dolls better. Vicky can keep it if she wants." She picked up one of the blond baby dolls, rocked it in her arms and cooed at it.

Vicky did the same with the green golliwog. Lisa almost gagged at the sight, but she managed to turn away, make polite noises at Nancy, and walk out of the house.

I will not, I *will not* make a fuss about that damn doll, she thought. I will not ask Vicky why she is acting this way. She's just doing it to upset me. I won't let her see that she's succeeding.

Vicky continued to cuddle the doll when she went back to watch television. When Lisa called her for dinner, she dropped it into a chair and seemed to forget about it. After dinner she hauled her Erector set out of the closet and worked on some spider-like construction until it was time for bed.

All evening Lisa sat on the sofa, going over some reports, while in the chair on the opposite side of the room, black button eyes gleamed at her, red lips of felt seemed, impossibly, to glisten. Even the sprawl of the grotesquely long limbs was obscene, threatening.

After Vicky kissed her good night, Lisa put aside the reports, put aside the pretense that she could read the words written on the page. She returned the golliwog's glare.

It had to be some sort of delayed reaction to the divorce, to the separation from her father, Lisa decided. Vicky had seemed to understand at the time, and it had been her own idea to end the visits to George's new family. Maybe they shouldn't have allowed it. Maybe

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Vicky needed something, some kind of affection or security that she wasn't getting from her mother. Maybe this — this *fascination* with the ugly doll would end if she started seeing her father again.

And maybe I'm making something out of nothing, she thought. But it won't hurt to give George a call in the morning.

She went to bed. To dream of golliwogs capering on long, floppy legs and grinning with wet, red lips.

Vicky didn't go near the doll for a couple of days. She seemed not to notice it was still in the chair where she'd left it. Lisa didn't say anything, didn't even ask her to move it. Then, one evening toward the middle of the week, after Vicky had gone to bed, Lisa noticed that there were no black button eyes gleaming at her from across the room.

On a hunch she checked her daughter's bedroom. Vicky was sound asleep, her cheek touching the golliwog's head.

Shuddering, Lisa eased it out from under her arm and dropped it — not in the garbage can, which had been her first thought — but on the floor by the bed. Then she gave it a kick. If Vicky remembered it in the morning, she would probably think she'd knocked it under the bed herself. And there was a chance she wouldn't remember, that it would lie there, getting dustier and dustier until Lisa could safely take it out and throw it away.

George had been delighted to include Vicky in his plans for Saturday afternoon. He was taking his family to the zoo. Vicky took the news with no perceptible show of emotion, even allowed herself to be coaxed into wearing a dress. Lisa thought that catering to George's prejudice just this once might not be a bad idea. It would be awkward after they'd been apart so long.

When the car pulled up in front of the house shortly before noon, Vicky reached for her coat, said good-bye as if she were going off to her own funeral. Lisa almost managed to convince herself this had been unnecessary, that the thing with the doll had been a passing whim. Vicky was getting along fine without her father. It was the thought of seeing him again, and the white bunnies, that had depressed her.

"Hello, Kitten. Ready to go?"

She looked around the room as if trying to remember something. "Just a second. There's something I have to get," she said. She ran back to her bedroom and came out carrying the golliwog.

Lisa's heart sank.

"What's this?" George asked in his overhearty, paternal voice.

Vicky looked more cheerful than she had in days. She was almost glowing as she held up the doll for her father to see. "This is Felly, my doll," she said. "Good-bye, Mom."

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"Cute little thing, isn't it? Where did you get him?" George asked as they stepped out onto the porch.

"Oh, Daddy. Felly is a *girl*! Can't you—"

The voices faded away. Lisa went to the kitchen and took the half-full bottle down from the shelf where she kept it hidden. Only George could think a thing like that was cute. And Vicky? Did she think so, too? Apparently so. It had graduated to the status of having a name and a sex.

Lisa very seldom drank anything stronger wine, but that afternoon she finished the bottle of bourbon George had forgotten to pack when he moved out. It seemed the only possible accompaniment for her sense of failure. She wasn't very maternal. She'd always admitted that. But they'd been getting along all right — hadn't they?

They had been until that goddamn doll came along, she thought, knowing she was being unreasonable. She couldn't put the blame on a floppy, lifeless rag doll. But she did. Where had it come from?

They were supposed to be back at five. At six she got a phone call. They were having such a good time that they decided to have dinner, would maybe take in a movie after. Lisa regretted the fact that the bottle was now empty. At nine thirty when Vicky came in and stopped at the door to wave good-bye to George and the others, Lisa noticed that her eyes were bright and her cheeks were pink. She closed the door, hugged Felly to her chest, and whirled around the room.

"Oh, Mom, we had such *fun!* Daddy took us to the petting zoo, too, and we saw the *sweetest* baby fawns and baby lambs."

Lisa couldn't help herself. "And how were the baby bunnies?"

Vicky looked puzzled. "There weren't any baby bunnies," she said. "Oh, Mom, look what Daddy bought for Felly. He said she should have something to show people she's a girl. Isn't it pretty?" She waved the doll, now wearing a broad pink ribbon around its scrawny neck, in Lisa's face.

"Simply darling," Lisa said.

In the next few weeks things went from bad to worse — though Lisa had to admit that was only her opinion. Everyone else seemed to be perfectly content with the change. Vicky was quieter, less opinionated, less — curious about the things other people didn't want her to be curious about. She started wearing dresses again, tied her hair back with ribbons, sat properly in a chair instead of sprawling on the floor when she watched television. There were no more notes from her teacher, no complaints from the neighbors about fights.

And always, that ugly green golliwog dangled from her arms.

It's not the doll, Lisa told herself. I'm not so crazy I think a rag-stuffed doll is warping my daughter's mind. It's — it's the divorce. She's just having a delayed reaction to that. She's afraid

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her father will stop loving her. She's trying to be what he wants her to be so she can keep his love.

She'll get over it. I'm not upset.

Liar, she thought. I'm terrified. I'm losing her. I thought I was doing something right, she was going to turn out different from me — stronger. Whatever the reason is, she's rejecting *me*, everything I've won for myself, for her. She's wrecking that. Falling right into the mold everyone else wants her to fit.

Lisa no longer thought about stealing Felly some night when Vicky was asleep, dropping her — *it* into the garbage can. She wanted to run it through the disposal. Burn it. Hack it to pieces with her carving knife.

Stop being ridiculous, she told herself.

Every time she saw it, it grinned at her. Wetly.

One evening she was frying hamburgers. Vicky sat by the table, prattling about a dress someone at school had been wearing. The grease popped, burning Lisa's hand, and she swore. When she turned she saw Vicky staring at her, mouth open, her eyes wide and her hands clamped over the place where Felly's ears would have been if rag dolls had ears.

"What's wrong with you?" Lisa demanded.

"What you *said*!" Vicky said in a shocked voice. "It's not *nice* for a lady to use words like that."

She seemed to be perfectly serious.

That night Lisa did something she hadn't done since high school. She cried herself to sleep.

Vicky was spending not just Saturday afternoons but entire weekends with George and his family. She came home talking about ballet shoes and charm bracelets. For the Christmas play she was given the role of an angel to play. Other years she'd held out for a donkey or at least a shepherd. This year she couldn't wait to try on her wings and halo.

On Valentine's Day she got cards from every boy in class. Four of them were handmade, with globs of paste still showing on the paper doilies. She taped those to the walls of her room, and Lisa heard her sigh when she looked at them.

Felly was starting to look fat. Vicky hugged her — *it* so much she must have squeezed all the stuffing down to its stomach.

Every report card she brought home showed an A in conduct.

And as the school year came to an end, she acted nervous when Lisa mentioned summer camp. Lisa tried to convince herself she didn't know what was on her mind, but it was no surprise when George came to pick her up one Friday evening and then stood in the living room, shifting about as if his feet hurt. There were noises from the bedroom but Vicky didn't come out.

"Something on your mind, George?"

He cleared his throat, looked at the

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floor. "Well, yes. Edna and I — that is, Vicky wanted me to ask you—" He seemed to be choking on the words.

"She wants to live with you."

"Just for the summer," he said quickly. "Edna and I do think it would be better for her. You're away at work all day. It's not good for a girl that age to be alone so much of the time."

"If that's what Vicky wants." She went to her bedroom and shut the door, didn't come out until she was sure they were gone.

Even having the decision made didn't ease Vicky's nervousness. She was even more quiet than usual, sometimes hugged Lisa for no apparent reason. But neither of them could talk about the thing that had come between them.

And then it was the morning of the last day.

They'd been up packing until past midnight. Vicky had so much she wanted to take with her — new dresses and hair ribbons, a dozen pairs of shoes, a charm bracelet, her valentines, the doll house George had given her for her birthday. And Felly. Fat Felly with the lump in its belly. But, of course, that wouldn't go into a suitcase. Vicky would carry it with her, as always.

George was to come by at eight o'clock. At seven the alarm rang. Lisa turned it off but couldn't force herself out of bed. At seven thirty she told herself she should, really *should* see that Vicky had a hot breakfast before she left. At a quarter to eight the bedroom door opened just a crack and Vicky peeked inside.

She looked like a doll herself, one of the pretty ones. Her hair was shiny from careful brushing, tied back with a pink ribbon. She was wearing one of her new summer dresses, one that George's wife had bought her. It looked as if it would fall apart if Vicky even thought about climbing trees.

But, or course, Vicky didn't do those things any more.

"Come on in, brat," Lisa croaked. "Maybe you'd better not come too close. I think I'm catching a cold. Don't want to take a chance on spoiling the start of your vacation."

Vicky came over and kissed her anyway.

From where she was lying Lisa couldn't see Felly, but she thought that was just as well. She didn't want to look at the thing she still felt, irrationally, had been the cause of the change in her daughter. It was typical of Vicky's new thoughtfulness that she held it behind her back.

"You don't have a cold. You've been crying."

"Yeah? Well, I'm allowed sometimes."

"Mom, I'm not going away forever. Just a couple months."

When she came back, if, would there be anything left of the bright-eyed little brat who'd sneaked into the boys' restroom just to *see*?

"Yeah, I know. I'll miss you

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anyway." No, she thought. That isn't true. She thought of all the things left in the closet when Vicky had finished packing — the jeans, the Erector set, the football, the baseball bat, the sneakers. The little girl who had worn and used those things, *that* was the girl Lisa would miss. Did this Vicky remember her? Or was she ashamed to think how she used to be?

"I don't want you to be lonely, Mom," Vicky said. "I have a present for you. It's from Felly and me. To keep you company."

They heard the sound of the front door opening, George calling.

"He's here," Vicky said unnecessarily. She slipped something under Lisa's pillow. "Don't get up. I'll call you tonight. Bye." A quick kiss and she was gone.

LIsa couldn't move. She couldn't even cry any more. She'd always said she wasn't very good at the job of motherhood, and here was the proof, if anyone needed it. A good mother would have — What? She didn't even *know* what a good mother could have done to keep from losing her child. But, then, a good mother wouldn't have felt she *was* losing this child.

There was a lump under her neck. Vicky's present. Tiredly, she rolled over and lifted the pillow. What was it?

She picked up the warm, egg-shaped thing and weighed it in her hand. It was about the size of her palm, of some sort of knitted material, seamless and firm.

Felly laid an egg, she thought, smiling, then bursting into delighted laughter. Maybe she hadn't lost. This was surely one of the old Vicky's bright ideas. It had to have been Vicky's idea. George had no sense of humor. Yes, a joke, maybe to tell her not to take this transformation too seriously, that she was just doing it — for whatever reason — and would be back soon, just as she had been before. Where had it come from, some sort of magic store or toy shop? Lisa hugged it to her chest, then held it out to look again. It really did look like the sort of egg a rag doll might lay. What a delicious joke — on George and all the rest of them.

And then the fabric split. A tiny green limb poked out.

ANSWER TO NOVEMBER ACROSTIC

Quotation: For a long moment he stared at it; and then his gaze wandered up among the welter of stars and sought out a greenish-silver speck far brighter than any of its fellows. For many minutes his attention clung unwavering to that brilliant point of light. Author and work: Raymond Z. Gallun, "Old Faithful."

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This story first appeared in a locally circulated magazine at Temple University called Tracks. *Its author recently finished his first SF novel, TERRARIUM, based on his F&SF story of the same title (April 1980) and is now working on a novel about John James Audubon.*

The Sleepwalker

BY
SCOTT SANDERS

I awake from feverish sleep to the thunder of jets overhead, which reminds me that I must go this morning for x-rays at the airbase. The daylight world knifes into me. I realize that I have dreamed all night of being captured, put on trial, and executed by robot officials whose armies I have refused to serve. Dream speech lies with a sour taste on my tongue. Awareness of the slaughter in Africa rises in my stomach like nausea.

Struggling against my fear, I roll over to find that Sharon already lies awake, watching me, her chestnut eyes slick with tears.

"Hello, world," I whisper. But she will not smile. The worry on her face has become so habitual in recent days that it seems molded into her skin.

"Gordon," she says, "I couldn't stand it if you went to prison."

"I'm not going to prison," I answer, throwing the covers off and beginning to dress. What else can I do but bluff, since I feel caught up in this governmental machine which is driving me to war or to jail? For days now I have felt helplessly in its grip, like a bale of meat on a conveyor belt.

"You're lying to me."

"What do you want me to say? I'm not a prophet." I wrench a shirt from its hanger, huddle over the simmering radiator. In the pipes I hear trapped water gurgling through a valve, as if into freedom, only to be pumped round again through the system. I feel like the water, trapped in this quarrel with Sharon, trickling through the same phrases we have used so many times before.

"But if the x-rays show your foot is healed," she says, "they'll draft you." I tug at my jeans, lace my boots, wrestling against the words that are beating

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their way into me. "Won't they?" she insists.

"They may just lose track of me."

"They never lose anybody."

"Maybe they'll decide I'm not worth the trouble of prosecuting."

"If you're against their war, they prosecute."

"Maybe I should get into graft or rackets. Or industrial espionage. Or bribery. Them they don't touch."

"Gordon, for Christ's sake, be serious."

Every word we say I sense ahead of time, as if we are rehearsing a script. The prevision chills me, but I cannot resist. "Maybe they'll declare me politically suspect."

"They've drafted outright revolutionaries. They won't balk at a two-bit conspirator like you."

I comb my beard, parcel keys and coins and wallet among my pockets, fetch my gloves. Lying on her side, head propped on one bent arm, she follows me about the bedroom with those tear-slick eyes.

"You're forgetting to limp," she says.

"Limping won't fool anybody."

"You promised! Oh," she cries in frustration, "you're not even trying. You're going like a sheep to the slaughter."

"Sharon, Sharon," I whisper, limping my way to the bed.

She draws away from my hand. "You're going to slink into that hospital, aren't you, and they're going to say you're ready for war? And you're going to say you won't go, and turn yourself in, and go to prison? And for what? Who's going to give a damn? Except me?"

"Maybe the war will end," I say as I bend down to kiss her, trying to keep the anger from my voice. But it is already *in* my voice, I can hear it rising like water in the radiator.

"They'll start another."

"The orthopedist may say my foot's no good for the army. Won't hold up. Cost them a fortune."

"You know you're fit."

She is right, which maddens me. I kiss her on the forehead, between those gleaming eyes. For the first morning since a rockslide crushed my left ankle, nine hobbling months ago, my foot signals no pain. I imagine the nylon joint shifting silently in my ankle as I walk around the bedroom. Every time I think of that plastic inside me, knowing it will outlast my flesh, outlast even my bones in the grave, I feel a twinge of death.

"You're not limping."

"Would you rather have me crippled?" I snap.

"I'd rather have you outside of prison."

"Well, you just keep at me, and I'll want to go inside." I slam the bedroom door behind me.

Going down the stairs, I am frightened, because the chill of prevision grips me again. I can see the next few

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seconds of my life laid out before me as if in time-lapse photography: my stumble at the foot of the stairs, my touching the knobbed post of the banister, my answering the phone. In fact I pick up the cold instrument before it rings, and through the earpiece I hear the voice I expected, saying the words I expected.

"Gordon," says my sister, "if it's a matter of money — if you think the doctor would fix this report for a fee — I can make that right."

"You don't understand," I answer, hearing my patient words a fraction of a second before I utter them, "I don't want to buy my way out of the war, or trick my way. I'll win by force of argument —"

"Or you'll go to jail like a sap."

"Or I'll go to jail."

Even her peevish sigh I recognize before it creeps through the wire into my ear. "You sound like such a zombie. Is this you — or a tape recording? You're stumbling into this like —" and while she searches for the word, I already hear it approaching: *like a sleepwalker*, and she says, "— like a sleepwalker."

"Good-bye, sister," I answer numbly, wanting to say more. But the earpiece feels leaden in my hand as I lower it to the cradle of the telephone. Even though I want to say words that will secure her to me with the hooks of love, I *see* myself hanging up, and that is what I must do.

Like a sleepwalker I make my way into the kitchen, where the same water seeps through another radiator. As I scramble eggs and stir grits for breakfast, the chilling prevision leaves me, and I am free to think. Once again I feel at home in my body. The smell of eggs is new when it reaches my nose, the frayed terrycloth napkin new to my fingers. Every second comes to me fresh again, like a gift.

Riding the bus as far as Roma, the snow-skinned countryside sliding by me in stark shades of black and white, I can think of nothing except those two hypnotic moments of prevision. I have experienced *déjà vu* before, but never twice in one morning, and never for so many seconds at a stretch. Each time the spell of awareness comes over me suddenly, as if a switch has been thrown in my mind, and I *know* everything that will happen to me, every sense impression, every gesture by people around me, until the switch is thrown again and I am tumbled into my ordinary consciousness. Psychologists describe it as an illusion. But none of their explanations persuades me. I don't believe these are moments from some previous lifetime, don't believe in reincarnation or ancestral memory, in prophecy or reversible time. I don't believe this foreknowledge comes from dreams or simple coincidence. So I am left with the experience itself, which I can name but not explain. *Déjà vu.* Foreknowledge. Prevision. It comes on

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me like a seizure, and just as swiftly withdraws when it is done with me.

When the bus enters Roma, crunching the heaps of plowed snow, I realize that I have gone a stretch of two hours without thinking of the war. At least my seizures, whatever their cause, have eased me of this constant fret.

At the moment my boot touches the salted parking lot of the bus station, the switch is thrown again in my mind, and I am possessed by foreknowledge of the next second, and the next, and the next. As I walk through the snow toward the highway where I will try to hitch a ride, I feel split in two: one version of myself marching ahead, a fraction of a second further into time, and a second version walking behind, filling the footprints left by the first. I shake my head, trying to clear the illusion away. But even this gesture I see a moment before I make it.

Standing at the roadside with my thumb hanging out in the direction of the Roma Arsenal, where I must go for my x-ray, I sense each car a moment before it tops the rise approaching me, sense even its make and color. After stamping numb feet in the snowdrift for twenty minutes, I know that the next vehicle to appear — a van, reeking of paint — will stop for me. And it does. I hear what the driver will say to me even before he leans across to open the passenger door. "Damn fool day to be going anyplace, with or without a car."

I know it is a question, and so I say, "Roma Arsenal."

"It's where I'm going. Get in."

Paint fumes from the rear of the van wrap round my throat like a scarf. The man turns to me a face already familiar, right down to the broken eyetooth and under each eye the slash of bruised skin. "What business you got at the arsenal?"

I can tell him in detail about the crushed foot, the synthetic ankle, and today's x-ray which will decide whether I'm fit material for the army. Between sentences I want to shush myself but cannot, because I hear the future words already leaking out of me.

"Korea," he says, tugging up one pantleg, and beneath it the leg of insulated underwear, to reveal a shin with a long scar the bleached white of dead fish. "Steel pin in there. Hurts like the devil in this weather."

Helpless to resist the pressure of whatever is driving me through time, I say, "Korea was the first of the stupid wars." I wait for him to lift his wounded leg onto the brake, to say, *Get the hell out.*

Instead he gives a brutal laugh and says, "I tell myself that every time it gets cold and this leg starts kicking up."

The switch has been thrown. I am delivered back into real time again. I am left to wonder about each new second as it comes to me.

For the next twelve miles, until we reach the chain-link fence of the arsen-

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al, we talk about the war in Africa, about his people and mine, about where I played high school basketball and where he did, about truckstops, about pigs. All the talk comes fresh to me. I open each new minute with excitement, as if it were a package. Then as we cruise between the World War II tanks which guard the entrance to the arsenal, the driver says, "Rustbuckets. If I could just get the contract for painting all them old crates in olive drab, I'd be a rich man."

Suddenly the switch is thrown again, and I am trapped in that divided awareness — half of me dwelling in the present, half projected a moment further into the future. Like a sleepwalker I hand the guard my papers at the gate. Part of me clings to my paranoia, fearing I will be suspected of some crime, that my name will appear on the list which the guard reads with his thumb; but part of me *knows* he will wave me through the gate. The knowledge is so much stronger than the fear that I do not give in to the paranoia. I stamp my boots on the doormat, waiting for the future to hustle me along its fixed rails.

When the guard looks up, I flinch inwardly from the words he is about to say. "Physical, eh?" handing me the paper. "Looks like the big green machine finally caught up with you, buddy."

I pile in next to the painter again, fumes of turpentine gripping me by the throat. The guard waves us through the gate, and I remember water seeping through the radiator valves, circling forever through that closed system. Somewhere on the edges of my mind I feel the faint pressure of understanding, but I cannot tug the idea into the center of consciousness, because the center is filled with my awareness of the next moment.

"Hurt much?" the painter asks, nodding at my foot.

"Not any more."

"That all's kept you out of the war?"

"That — and conscience."

He snorts. "Conscience don't cut no butter —" and I can hear the guard's words playing back through this man with the bruised eyesockets, "no butter at all — with the big green machine."

"It's not as good as a mangled foot."

"What'd they say about your conscience?"

"More or less what you just did." I imitate his snort, and his laugh rattles through the van.

Black insulated steampipes, carried on steel posts, snake along beside the road, then cross over our heads as we near the hospital. They spread in every direction, like smears of black crayon drawn against the snow. Inside them I sense the glistening steam, hustling from boiler to warehouse to machine shop and eventually back to boiler.

"What are you painting?" I ask the man.

"Fences."

"This place is all fences."

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"Damn near. Ones I'm painting is where the commanding officer's daughter keeps her pet deer."

"Deer," I repeat, imagining the dappled creature pacing the circuit of its fence.

"Here's the boneshop," the painter tells me. The windowless hospital hulks in front of us, humpbacked like a gymnasium.

"Thanks for the lift."

"You bet." Just before the van door slides shut, the painter turns his bruised eyes on me and says, "Keep out the war if you can."

I nod, feeling real time leak again into my mind. When I approach the hospital, I am free, or at least I imagine myself to be free, not knowing from moment to moment what I *must* do. *This is what frightens me about the prevision;* it eliminates all illusion of choice; when I am in its grip, the next word, the next action is dictated by some force outside myself. Because I do not know when the switch will be thrown again, I think furiously about how to resist whatever power is taking over my mind.

I know ahead of time the chocolate-colored face, the eyes with their inflamed lids, which the x-ray technician will lift towards me. "What unit are you in?" she asks.

"I'm not in any. I'm a civilian."

"Oh. I wondered — who'd let you wear that beard."

Against my will I feel my hand lifting toward my chin, feel it pinch a tuft of whiskers. My confused smile feels as if it is being drawn on my skin from outside. I am a blank: emotions are scribbled on my face, tape-recorded words speak through my lips, invisible wires jerk my limbs from pose to pose.

"Just relax, and hold quite still," she says, positioning my foot over the photographic plate. Sitting on the table, frozen in the position she has given to me, I sense the energy shunting inside the x-ray apparatus. In a few seconds I hear the hiss of electromagnetic waves slicing through my ankle. Then silence. I do not know whether the switch has been thrown again, or whether the power which is manipulating me has simply paused. So I sit, limp on the starched skin of the table, like a puppet with my strings slack.

A bell sounds, and my strings are jerked taut again. The technician brings the developed x-ray photographs to me in her milk-chocolate hands, which I want to grasp but cannot. I want to hold someone, anyone, want to drag myself out of this puppet show.

Spreading the photo against a view light, she studies the white outline of my nylon ankle. "Any pain?"

"No," I hear myself answer.

"Neat job. A really neat piece of work."

Staring at this ghostly skeleton of my foot, I think, *that is not me. They have slipped this synthetic flesh into my body, but it is not me. They have*

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danced me to this hospital and propped me on this table, but they have not invaded my true self. I am hiding from them here in the catacombs, where their instruments will never detect me.

"Take these with you to the doctor," the technician says. Still I cannot force my fingers to touch her, as I accept the x-rays.

Despite the tang of peppermint on the doctor's sterilized breath, I can still smell in my clothes the turpentine from the painter's van. The doctor's hands are cold as they rotate my foot, testing the ankle. "Does it hurt?"

"No."

"How about that?"

I shake my head. Or rather — my head is shaken. I have lost all sense of acting on my own desires. I feel myself *being lived.*

"No problem there at all," the doctor says. "A very elegant piece of surgery. Who performed the operation?"

I cannot answer. I am mesmerized by the spectacle of myself sitting on the examination table, my naked left foot jutting over the edge, the doctor's sterile hands manipulating my body. *This is a film, I am watching myself in a film. That is why it has to happen this way. That is why I know every word a second before it emerges, every frame a second before it snaps into focus. I am merely mouthing the lines of a film I have seen before. Seen how many times before?*

In a fit of terror I slither from the table, groping for my sock and boot. The doctor does not notice my fear as he scribbles a note in the folder where he has placed my x-rays. "... Full radial extension ..." he is mumbling to himself as he writes, "... functional normality ... recommend primary service category ..." Now he faces me, but does not look into my eyes.

"You could be in the infantry with that foot. March all day. Front lines." He jabs his pencil in the direction of my foot, now buried in its boot. "That's all," waving a sterilized hand toward the door.

I watch myself trail through the labyrinth of the hospital to the exit. On the curb, my back turned against the hunchbacked boneshop, I stamp feet that already sense numbness creeping into them from the snow. Overhead in the darkness I hear the hiss of steam hustling through pipes, losing its heat to the outside air. At the gate the guard looks up from his magazine, squints for a moment at my face, then waves me through.

Near the antique army tanks, their treads encrusted with snow, I wait for my first ride. Headlights pick me out of the obscurity for a moment, then let me go. My thumb grows stiff from flagging cars that I know will not halt. Finally the Buick arrives which has to stop for me — and it does. I know beforehand the squirrel tail which dangles from its antenna. Before the driver opens her mouth, I hear her

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first sentence. And I know before I open my own what I must answer. But we have our conversation anyway, hurtling down the tunnel of our headlights, because the film will not stop.

On the bus I am granted a few minutes of freedom. These moments of lucidity are coming further and further apart; the spells of foreknowledge are lasting longer each time. Through the window I watch the snow-covered landscape gliding past in the moonlight, all the earth a shattering whiteness and all the trees and houses black. This is some alien planet, I tell myself, where all colors are reduced to shades of gray, a planet silent and bleak and cold under a cold star. Suddenly the focus of my eyes changes and I am staring at my own reflection in the bus window. Because of the dim light I can only see empty sockets where the eyes should be. My mouth appears like a dark slash in my beard. Through this reflected skull of my face I glimpse the night country seething by, and I am frightened. I want to smash the window. But I know there is no escape out there.

At the last stop before my own, an enormous woman boards the bus. As she eases her way down the aisle toward me, her black coat flapping against the seats, her bag of groceries lurching right and left with the motion of her body, I feel the weight of foreknowledge pressing on me again. It squeezes my brain with an actual physical pressure, as if the woman pressing her way up the aisle were a piston, shoving the future before her. When she asks if the seat beside me is free, I want to say *no*, but I nod my head *yes* because I am forced to, and for the same reason I accept the bag of groceries which she hands me. There is no room, she explains, between her own lap and the seat in front of us. And you, such a thin boy, you have so much room, you won't mind helping an old woman like me.

Even her groans and puffs are familiar, as she adjusts her bulk to the seat. Thrusting my nose over the edge of the bag, I know what I will smell: cinnamon and garlic. When she speaks to me, I smell the same flavors, and love the old woman, even though she seems to have brought my prescience onto the bus with her.

"No night to be alone on a bus," she says.

"I'm going home," I explain.

"To a mother?"

"A wife."

"You should crawl into her arms and stay there."

To my own amazement, I am crying. Hoping she won't see, I turn my face away to blink at that other ghostly face in the window, and it waits for me there, the empty sockets opening like hatches onto the night country outside. The hope is pointless, because I know what she will say next.

"My husband never let himself cry. Never once, that I knew of." She fishes

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a plastic-coated snapshot from her purse and holds it near my eyes. "He was a soldier." I glimpse a tiny man engulfed in gold braid, visor, gloves. "You're not a soldier, are you?" I shake my head. "I knew you weren't when I saw your beard. That's why I wanted to sit with you — to find out how you've escaped."

"I haven't — yet," I answer.

"You won't," she says matter-of-factly, as if predicting weather. "Nobody does. One way or another, they get you." Once again at the edges of my mind I feel the slight ache of understanding. But I cannot locate the spot. The moment passes. I am hustled on through time, already hearing her next words. "This war is awful. Where is it now? I can't keep track." Before I can answer she continues. "There was a war going before I was born, and there's been one more or less all the time since then. Took every man I ever cared about, either for a while or for keeps."

I want to answer the hurt I hear in her voice, but I am not allowed. All I can do is gather my gloves and knit cap in preparation for my stop. She senses that I am going, and says, "Here, take a pomegranate."

"No, thanks. Really."

But she is already drawing the slick red fruit from her grocery bag and handing it to me. "It's full of vitamin C. I don't eat them myself. I only buy them out of habit."

"For my health, then," I say, accepting the pomegranate.

Turning in the seat to let me slip by, she advises, "Share it with your wife."

"I will, and thank you," I call over my shoulder. Once again standing in the snow, feeling the plump fruit in my coat pocket, I watch the bus drag its squares of yellow light into the darkness. I wave, but in the fogged windows I can see no one waving back.

The snow in our lane crunches with the dryness of sand. It has stayed cold more days than I can recall. I have been trapped in this state of *déjà vu* more minutes than I can recall. Walking home, occasionally I sense the puppet strings relaxing, but as soon as I try to move in any direction except the one ordained for me, the strings jerk taut and I am driven forward. My own dogs, prowling in the circle of illumination beneath the barn light, bark at me as at a stranger. Only my voice reassures them. They broom the snow with their tails as they prance around me on my way to the door.

The knob turns without my key, and I am angry with Sharon for leaving the door unlocked again. But that is not what I must talk with her about. So when she looks up with a care-drawn face from the kitchen table, I say to her, "I'm supposed to crawl into your arms and never come out."

She returns me a strained smile. "What did the doctor say?"

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"The ankle's fine. I'm fit for war."

"They won't get you, Gordon. I've sat here all day thinking of ways to fool them." Folding a sheet of paper which lay on the table beside her, she seems to catch herself on the verge of reading me her list of schemes. "But that can wait until tomorrow. Now you must eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"But you've had nothing since lunch."

"Sweetheart, please, I don't want to eat. I want to talk." Peeling the coat from my shoulders, I remember the fruit in my pocket, and say, "How do you eat a pomegranate?"

"What on earth made you think of that? We don't have one."

"I do," holding it in my hand for her to see. "A woman on the bus gave it to me."

For Sharon, a giving person, this gift is no mystery. So she cuts it open, spoons the nested seeds from inside, and together we stain our lips scarlet with the juice as we talk over the kitchen table.

After explaining to her my day's experience, I conclude: "And so everything seems to have happened before, as if it were stored on film and the film were being replayed."

"Even what you're telling me right now?"

"Even now. I feel as if every moment is laid out ahead of time. I see myself leaning on this table with my elbows, I watch the smear of juice on your lips, I hear our voices — and it's all like an old film."

"Well, just do something crazy. Get up and dance. Do anything to snap the illusion."

"I can't. I've tried that all day. But every time I think I'm about to do something really free, I realize that whatever I do has been lying there in my future, waiting for me."

Although she faces me across the table, her chestnut eyes do not look straight into mine. All day other people have focused their gaze a few degrees away from where I think I am, as if I really were split in two, and my ghostly second self were drawing their attention.

"It's paranoia," she says. "You have to see that. It's illusion. For weeks you've been talking about feeling trapped in the huge machine that runs this country...."

"... and runs the army, and as much of the world as possible."

"Yes, yes." Her eyes shift their warm stare, but they never quite seem to fix on me. "The machine. The system. You've been brooding about it so long, you've persuaded yourself it's taken you over completely. That's where the puppet feeling comes from."

Now I understand that faint ache of understanding which has pressed on the edges of my mind several times during the day. "And what if they really have taken me over?"

"Rubbish. You're talking nonsense." I can hear the margin of fear in

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her voice, and I realize that it is fear of me, fear of this obsessed creature I am becoming. But I am powerless to resist the words speaking through me.

"No," shaking my head, "it's not paranoia. Not illusion. I've lived through these minutes before. I've lived through this whole day before." Now the leaps of mind frighten me. "In fact, maybe I've never lived any other day but this one. Maybe all my memories of past days are only part of the old delusion that I'm breaking out of."

"Gordon, please —"

"So today for the first time I'm seeing through the illusion that traps everyone else — the illusion of freedom, of days unrolling, of the future. Maybe we're all caught in this one day, forced to go through it forever. And every night sleep erases our knowledge of this time, only leaves us memories of the illusory yesterdays. But for some reason or other, I've broken through. I *know* I've lived this day before."

Sharon watches me with that cautious alarm I've seen her show towards drunken tramps in bus stations. I can feel her mind resisting the temptation of turning me into a clinical case. When she speaks, her voice betrays an inner struggle for calmness. "Now let's think about this. You've been under strain because of the army ... because of the war. There's jail to worry about."

"It's not paranoia." I can hear the agitation, verging on frenzy, in my own voice. Yet I feel aloof from my words, as if they were crying at me from a tape recorder.

"Then maybe it's just exhaustion. Tricks of your nerves. You could imagine yourself trapped in today, couldn't you, if it was the only way of keeping tomorrow from coming? The only way of keeping out of jail or out of war?"

"I *know* this day, every minute of it!" I cry, slamming the table, scattering pomegranate seeds. The rage which shakes my voice and drives me lurching toward the door seems remote from my innermost self, which is hiding again in the catacombs of my mind.

"Gordon — let's go sleep."

"You want me to forget."

"No, no, my darling. You must rest. You've got to clear your mind."

"You *do* want me to forget. You want me to slip back into the old delusion that every day is a new one." Against my will I find myself stuffing arms into my coat, drawing laces tight on my boots.

"You're not going out?" she demands in a startled voice.

"I have to walk. To think." Walls are rising in my mind, shutting me off from this woman I love.

"But it's freezing out. It's so late." Invisible wires tug me to the door, even though some voice deep inside me screams *stay, stay.* "You don't even have your hat on, or your gloves." My wired hands pull the door open. "Gordon, don't go away from me. Please don't go away." Her voice bores

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through all barriers to reach me, like a termite in the woody pulp of my brain. For a second I balance on the threshold, all my love and desire drawing me back into the kitchen, all the force of this tyrannical day dragging me outside into the darkness.

The puppet master wins, and I am yanked through the door into falling snow. Air seeps into my lungs like needles. My boots make no sound in the white fluff which blankets everything. No matter which way I turn in my walking, knowledge of the next few seconds seizes me. By the time I reach the highway, where traffic has nearly ceased for the night, I have split in two again. With one self I watch the other scuff boots on a ditch bank, roll a ball of snow, scrape a wad of pitch from a jack pine. I can no longer think clearly, because my mind is so filled with this foreknowledge. But I struggle to hold onto Sharon's words: *Do something crazy. Get up and dance. Do anything to snap the illusion.* I replay them in my mind obsessively, like a mantra, because there is a hint in them of escape.

A splash of yellow light on the roadside jerks my head up, and I see a snowplow bearing down on me. Although its weight shudders the ground, it is uncannily silent, as if it charges at me out of a silent film. I wait on the heaped ridge of snow at the road's brim for it to pass. But Sharon's words echo in me, *do anything to snap the illusion*, and I feel an impulse to leap in front of the truck's blade. Then will I be free of this day? It nears, it nears, flashing its yellow lights, violent as an avalanche, and I have to choose within a second between these two impulses, to stay or to leap.

I am frozen in place at the roadside, not because I have chosen to live, but because whatever power is living me has refused to let me move. The snowplow rumbles past.

Bed draws me with a gravity I cannot resist. In it I will find Sharon awake, her chestnut eyes staring open. Sleep sucks me homeward with promises of forgetting, of breaking open tomorrow a new day.

I awake from feverish sleep to the thunder of jets overhead, which reminds me that I must go this morning for x-rays at the airbase. The daylight world knifes into me.

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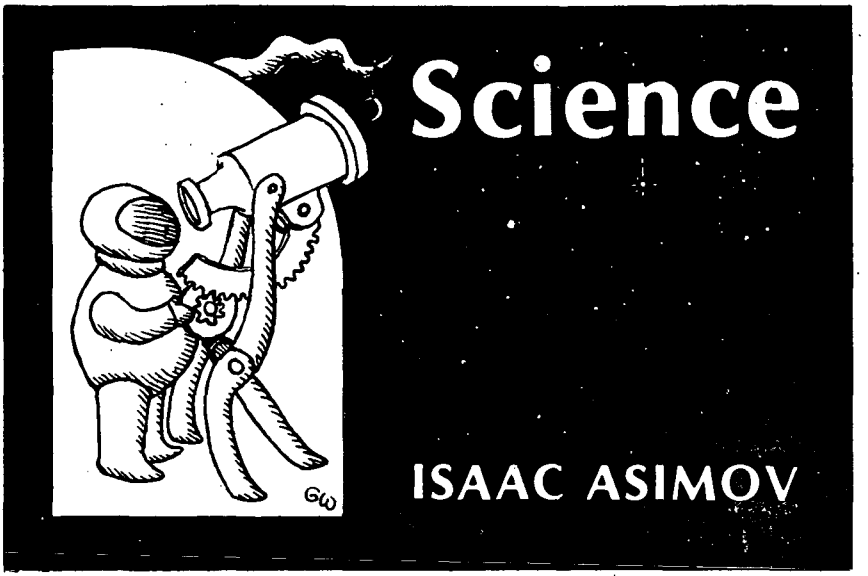

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

LET EINSTEIN BE!

Every once in a while I review books. I hate doing so because I hate being a critic; I hate reading with a view to making judgements or poking holes. I don't even know if I'm equipped to make judgements and poke holes. I just want to read for pleasure-and-profit, and continue the reading or stop it according to whether the p-and-p is there or not.

Every once in a while, though, someone asks me to do a review under conditions where I can't refuse, and in this case, I found myself with three books dealing with relativity. I did the job — but I also did some thinking.

Writing books that explain relativity to the layman is virtually big business. The theory of relativity is seventy-five years old, and it still needs explaining.

It is accepted by scientists; in fact, you can't understand modern physics without it. Yet the resistance to its concepts (never mind its mathematics) on the part of the layman never ebbs. Why are the attempts to explain relativity, while apparently endless, also apparently useless?

In this connection, consider a very famous epitaph intended for Isaac Newton, written by Alexander Pope (1668-1744):

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Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
God said, "Let Newton be!" and all was light.

Very true! And just as true, at least in popular estimation, are the two lines added in recent decades by the British journalist, John C. Squire (1884-1958). These are:

It did not last: the Devil howling, "Ho!
Let Einstein be!" restored the status quo.

And there you are! Einstein advanced crazy ideas that violated common sense, that could not be absorbed or grasped, and the public will have none of it!

And yet, in certain ways, humanity has lived through such intellectual crises before. Einstein's relativity is not the first interpretation of the Universe to violate common sense. It's just that earlier ones have ground their way into popular acceptance while relativity hasn't and perhaps never will.

I would like to give an instance of a situation as odd as anything Einstein ever dreamed up and yet one that *was* accepted.

Let us suppose that two people, Smith and Jones, are standing at point X along with you and me. Smith sets off in any direction at random, walking in a perfectly straight lines at a steady 5 kilometers an hour. Jones sets off in the precisely opposite direction, also walking in a prefectly straight line at the same speed.

Let us suppose that neither Smith nor Jones requires food or drink; that neither gets tired; that neither encounters any obstacles such as mountains, deserts or oceans; that neither deviates in any way from the straight line travel at 5 kilometers an hour.*

Let us suppose, further, that you and I remain at point X and have the ability, at every moment, to determine the distance of Smith and Jones from ourselves and from each other. Furthermore, though we know nothing about geography, we are well-versed in ordinary arithmetic and Euclidean geometry.

At the end of 1 hours, Smith is 5 kilometers away in one direction, Jones is 5 kilometers away in the opposite direction, and they are 10 kilometers apart.

At the end of 2 hours, Smith is 10 kilometers away in one direction, Jones is 10 kilometers away in the opposite direction, and they are 20 kilometers apart

* *This is a "thought experiment," and we are allowed to simplify matters by omitting all non-essential entanglements.*

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Since we know arithmetic we feel safe in predicting that at the end of 10 hours, Smith will be 50 kilometers away in one direction, Jones will be 50 kilometers away in the other direction and they will be 100 kilometers apart. (And sure enough, if we check the situation at the end of 10 hours, we will find our prediction was correct.)

Knowing Euclidean geometry, we know that a straight line can be extended indefinitely, and since Smith and Jones are walking in opposite directions on a straight line, we can extrpolate our arithmetic forever.

For instance, after 8,000 hours (that's very nearly a year), Smith will be 40,000 kilometers away in one direction, and Jones will be 40,000 kilometers away in the other direction and they will be 80,000 kilometers apart.

This can be continued indefinietly by ordinary arithmetic, ordinary geometry and ordinary common sense. Anyone who would argue with such figures would have to be out of his or her mind.

Except that now we will set up a ridiculous assumption.

Let us suppose that 20,000 kilometers is an absolutely maximum separation.* No matter how long Smith walks away from us in a straight line in a given direction, he will never get more than 20,000 kilometers away from us. What's more, no matter how long Jones walks away from us in a straight line in the opposite direction, *he* can never get more than 20,000 kilometers away form us either. What's still more, Smith and Jones, as they firmly march off in opposite directions, can never get more than 20,000 kilometers away from each other.

Some hard-headed no-nonsense guy would surely object.

"This is simply insane!" Hard-head would say. "Why 20,000 kilometers?"

We shrug. That's just the way things are. It's our assumption.

"All right, then," says Hard-head, "suppose Smith has walked onward until he's 20,000 kilometers form us, and then suppose he keeps on walking. Doesn't he *have* to get farther away from us?"

No! If he reaches that maximum distance and insists on keeping on walking in the same straight line, he *can't* get farther from us. The distance between us changes but only in the sense that he now gets *closer* to us. After all if he can't get farther when he moves, he must get closer — and he just can't get farther.

** A better figure would be 20,037 kilometers, but I trust you will permit me the convenient approximation.*

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"Well, that's the most exasperatingly stupid rule anyone has ever thought up," says Hard-head, "and you must be a prize idiot to dream it up."

Well, perhaps, but let's see what the consequences are. Smith is walking in one direction, Jones in the other. After 2,000 hours, Smith is 10,000 kilometers in one direction, and Jones is 10,000 kilometers in the other direction, and they are 20,000 kilometers apart. Right?

"Right," says Hard-head.

If they keep on walking, Smith continues to get farther away from us and Jones continues to get farther away from us in the other direction, *but they can't get farther away from each other*, because they have reached the 20,000-kilometer maximum separation. As they keep on walking, by the rules we have set up, though each gets steadily farther away from us, each gets as steadily closer to the other.

After 3,000 hours, Smith has added 5,000 kilometers to his distance from us, and so has Jones. Each is now 15,000 kilometers away from us in opposite directions. Each, however, has *decreased* the distance from the other by 5,000 kilometers, so that they are now 10,000 kilometers apart.

"Let's get this straight," says Hard-head. "Smith is 15,000 kilometers away from us in one direction, and Jones is 15,000 kilometers away from us in the other direction, but Smith is only 10,000 kilometers from Jones. You're telling me that 15,000 + 15,000 = 10,000. Do you realize that if you carry on with this insanity, Smith and Jones will *meet*?"

Exactly! After 4,000 hours, Smith has travelled 20,000 kilometers in one direction, and Jones has travelled 20,000 kilometers in the other direction, and they will meet at point Y."

"So that 20,000 + 20,000 = 0," says Hard-head. "That's rich, that is. And what if they keep on walking?"

Well, they started off facing and walking in opposite directions and when they meet they are still facing and walking in opposite directions. If they keep on, they will pass each other. Smith retraces Jones steps; Jones retraces Smith's steps. They begin to move farther from each other but, having passed the 20,000-kilometer mark, they each begin to move closer to us.

After 6,000 hours, Smith and Jones have gotten half-way back to us and are each only 10,000 kilometers away from us, but they have been moving away from each other and are now 20,000 kilometers apart. AFter they have reached that maximum separation, they start moving toward each other again. After 8,000 hours, Smith and Jones face each other once again

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and both are zero kilometers away form us. We are all together again.

"I see. I see." says Hard-head. "Smith travels steadily in a given direction 8,000 hours, and Jones travels steadily in the opposite direction for 8,000 hours. Neither one veers from the original direction and yet they end up after all that walk right back home again."

Yes, indeed, and if they keep on walking they will meet again at Y, and then at X, and then at Y, and so on forever. And through all eternity they will never be more than 20,000 kilometers from their starting point.

What's more they can do this in any direction. Smith can move away from the original point X in a totally different direction from the one he first chose, and Jones can move in the direction opposite to that, and they will still meet at point Y. It will be the same point Y, no matter which straight line they move in opposite directions upon.

"The *same* point Y? How can you tell that?"

It follows from the original assumptions. Suppose that by going along two separate lines they meet a point Y in the first case and point Y' in the second. Both points would have to be 20,000 kilometers from us by the original assumption.

Suppose, then, we try to walk from point Y to point Y'. Since point Y is 20,000 kilometers away from us and we can't walk farther away by our orignal assumption, then no matter which direction we take we get closer to us than 20,000 kilometers. When we arrive at point Y' we are less than 20,000 kilometers from us, and yet point Y' is 20,000 kilometers from us. The only way we can avoid the paradox is to suppose that point Y and point Y' are identical.

In fact, if you study the situation further it turns out that, given our assumption of maximum separation, any two straight lines on the surface of the Earth intersect in two different points 20,000 kilometers apart, even though Eclidean geometry tells us that two straight line can intersect at only one point no matter now far they are extended.

Since all straight lines intersect, there are no parallel lines under the maximum-separation assumption.

Furthermore, without going into the details of the demonstrations, which would be very convoluted, it could be shown that the shortest distance between two points where one is due west of the other is *not* along a line that goes due west.

In a place like the United States, to go from one point to another which is due west, along the shortest lines, one must head off a little north of west. (If you live in Australia you have to head off a little south of west.)

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The farther the two east-west points are separated, the more you must angle northward to go from one to the other by the shortest route (or southward in Australia). It is even possible that if you place two points properly east and west, you will be forced to leave form one point in a due northerly direction to get to the other in minimum distance (and due southerly in Australia).

According to Euclid, the sum of the three angles of a triangle is 180°, but in a triangle drawn on the Earth, ignoring any unevennesses in its surface, the sum of the angles is always *more* than 180° if we insist on sticking to the maximum-separation assumption. In fact, you can draw a triangle on the surface of the Earth under conditions where each angle is a right angle, and the total sum is then 270°.

However, Hard-head has abandoned us long ago. Insanity is only funny up to a point and then it becomes infuriating.

Why set up the 20,000-kilometers separation-maximum if it means that the consequences will violate straightforward geometry in so many ways? It may be the kind of game that could interest people who are fascinated with recreational mathematics, but would it not lead to a dangerous divorce from reality?

No! That's just what it does not do! When navigators make long voyages across the ocean, or airplanes fly long distances anywhere, or when you want to check the time with a friend in London, or do any of a number of things — you find that all the screwball consequences of your distance maximum must be taken into account. It is those consequences which actually describe the Earth, and Hard-head's "commonsense."

Euclidean geometry is "plane geometry"; the geometry that is valid on a plane, by which is meant a perfectly flat surface. The surface of the Earth, however, is not perfectly flat. It is easy to deduce from the assumption of a 20,000-kilometer maximum-separation that the surface of the Earth is spherical. The behavior of lines on its surface is described by the deductions of "spherical geometry," and everything I have mentioned is in accord with that, provided you consider the Earth a sphere which is 6,370 kilometers in radius.*

But if the Earth is a sphere and if all the rules of spherical geometry are well-known, why didn't people understand the spherical nature of Earth at once?

* *Actually, Earth is not a perfect sphere, but a slightly oblate spheroid, so the geometry is not quite as I described it, but the deviations are not significant.*

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Because through most of history people were involved with very small patches of the Earth's surface, across which the degree of curvature was vanishingly small. The surface was so close to flat that plane geometry was good enough, and since plane geometry is the simplest form of geometry, it came to seem "commonsense" and to represent universal truth.

To be sure, some Greek philosophers worked out the sphericity of the Earth on theoretical principles, but it didn't really grab hold in general until the Age of Exploration began in the 15th Century. Since it was then impossible to navigate successfully without taking Earth's shpericity into consideration, the flat-Earth was discarded by all.(Well, there a few amusing cranks who uphold it even today.)

Of course, that doesn't mean that everyone uses the maximum-distance assumption and understands its consequences. I simply chose that assumption because it can be made to sound ridiculous and yet will give the right answers.

Fortunately for us all, the spherical Earth can be understood directly because if can be shown by a simple model. Paint the continents on a plastic sphere and you can quickly see what happens to Smith and Jones as they walk — their separations and approaches — the relationship of point Y to point X — the intersection of lines — the reason for a northward or southward angle in travelling from east to west and so on.

The concept of a globe is so easily grasped that even old Hard-head capitulated.

But now let's try something else, by beginning with another aspect of commonsense.

We all know that if we take a short run before trying a broad-jump, we jump farther than if we tried it from a standing start. The speed of the run adds to the speed imparted to the jump by your thigh muscles, so that you start with a faster motion and go a greater distance before gravity pulls you to the ground again.

If you take careful measurements you will find that a ball thrown forward at a rate of twenty kilometers per hour (relative to the ground) will travel forty kilometers per hour (relative to the ground) if thrown at its usual speed (relative to the thrower) while the thrower is travelling forward on a vehicle moving at twenty kilometers per hour.

On the other hand if the vehicle is moving at twenty kilometers per hour, and the thrower standing upon it throws a ball with a speed of twenty kilometers per hour in the direction opposite to that in which the vehicle

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is moving, the ball travels zero kilometers per hour relative to the ground and simply drops downward.

Furthermore, if two vehicles are approaching each other, each moving at 20 kilometers per hour relative to the ground, then a person on one vehicle will see the other approaching at 40 kilometers per hour relative to himself or herself.

To put it as briefly as possible, speeds add and subtract just as apples and oranges do, and since this is in accordance with Isaac Newton's laws of motion, you may think of it as part of a Newtonian universe. The Newtonian universe seems as commensensical as Euclidean geometry, largely because it's about as simple as it can be.

Now let's pull an assumption out of left field; one that involves the addition and subtraction of speeds. Let us suppose that each manipulation of speeds does *not* work for anything moving at 300,000 kilometers per second.* Something moving at that speed relative to us, does *not* change its speed relative to us when it is being carried forward or backward, in the direction of its travel or against it.

Light, as it happens, moves at that speed when travelling through a vacuum so that when we measure the speed of light relative to ourselves, it always turns out to be 300,000 kilometers per second regardless of the motion of the source of light relative to us (or our motion relative to it).

What's more, anything that ordinarily moves at a speed less than light can't be made to move at the speed of light, let alone faster than the speed of light, because if it reaches the speed of light it will be trapped there, unable to move faster or slower. Similarly, anything that ordinarily moves faster than light (like the hypothesized "tachyons") could never move as slowly as light, let alone slower.

In other words, any conceivable object in a vacuum, travels either forever *at* the speed of light, forever *less* than the speed of light, or forever *more* than the speed of light. The speed of light is a barrier in both directions (see THE LUXON WALL, December 1969).

Why should that be so? What is so magical about that particular speed at which light moves?

No answer, really. That's just the way the Universe is.

What are the consequences of that one assumption?

First, suppose two spaceships are moving away from each other, and

** Again, 299,792 kilometers per second would be better, but I'm using the convenient, and close, approximation.*

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each one is travelling 200,000 kilometers per second. Surely to each spaceship, the other spaceship seems to be receding at 200,000 + 200,000 = 400,000 kilometers per second?

No! The two figures have to be added in such a way that the key figure of 300,000 kilometers per second is not exceeded. A formula must be used which includes the ratio of the speed of the spaceship to the speed of light, and which will add any two figures, each below 300,000, in such a way that the sum is nearer 300,000 than either of the two figures being added, yet never quite reaches 300,000.

Again, imagine a spaceship flashing by you at enormous speed, and imagine further that you can observe and measure the time it takes light on the ship to travel from a source to a mirror and back. You will find that because the ship is moving so quickly, the light seems to be travelling a longer distance (relative to you) than it would if the ship were standing still (relative to you). Despite the fact that the light travelled a longer distance, the speed of light on the speeding ship is the same to you as it would be if the ship were standing still for the speed of light in a vacuum never changes. Yet the light manages to cover the greater distance.

The only conclusion is that the rate of passage of time slows on a speeding ship. If time slows and a second grows longer, then light, without increasing its speed, can travel the greater distance.

In other words, rather than abandon our silly assumption that light never changes its speed, we have to assume that time slows with increasing speed.

Now commonsense tells us that everything can change its speed if it's properly fooled with, while *nothing* can change the time rate, and therefore this tendency of relativists to do anything at all, even introduce the concept of variable time, just to save something as silly as the constancy of the speed of light, is simply enraging. The Hard-heads can't endure it.

Nor is a variable time-rate the only thing forced upon us by the constancy of light-speed. In order to save that constancy, we have to have moving objects shorten in length in the direction of their motion as they speed up.

Then, again, it turns out that the scheme of adding speeds in such a way that 300,000 kilometers per second is never exceeded makes an object more and more difficult to accelerate as that magic speed is approached. A force that is sufficient to increase its speed by 50 kilometers per second, will, as the object approaches the speed of light, suffice to do so by only 20 kilometers per second, and, as it approaches the speed of light still closer, by

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only 5 kilometers per second, and so on. Finally, as an object moves infinitesimally close to the speed of light, all the force in the Universe can only accelerate it infinitesimally.

This increasing difficulty of acceleration can be stated another way. We can say that a moving object increases its mass as it moves faster and faster, for the mass of an object is defined by the ease with which it accelerates.

The time-rate, the length, and the mass of an object all vary with speed according to formulas including the ratio of the speed of the object to the speed of light. At ordinary speeds, the difference from the Newtonian situation is negligible (just as over small patches of Earth's surface, the difference from flatness is negligible) while as the object approaches the speed of light, the time-rate and length each approach zero and the mass approaches the infinite.

Imagine! All this screwiness just to save the constancy of the speed of light.

In fact, there's more. The energy of motion of a body — its "kinetic energy" — is measured as half its mass times the square of its speed.* This means that mass and speed are the only things involved in energy of motion. At ordinary speeds, the addition of force in order to accelerate an object adds to its kinetic energy by increasing its speed. It increases mass also but infinitesimally, so that the increase is n)ever noticed at ordinary speeds and mass is assumed to be constant.

As the speed of an object gets progressively nearer the speed of light and the accelerating force has a smaller and smaller effect on the speed, it has a correspondingly greater and greater effect on the mass. More of the increase of kinetic energy is represented by the increase of mass. Thus, we have to accept the fact that energy can be converted into mass and, inevitably, vice versa. The relationship between the two is the famous "$e = mc^2$" which is also necessary, then, to save the constancy of light-speed.

Albert Einstein worked all this out in 1905 and went onto do much more in the succeeding decade. You make the one assumption and then have to alter a large number of other things, violating commonsense to do so, just to keep the assumption going.

Is it worth it?

Yes! Physicists studying vast stretches of space, intense concentrations

** I should really be saying "velocity." Speed and velocity are not quite the same thing in physics, but please excuse the imprecision this time because I'm making a conscious effort to use colloquial language in this essay in honor of the fact that I'm discussing relativity.*

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of energy, enormous speeds, find they cannot make head or tail out of what they observe unless they assume the correctness of the various equations of relativity. The thing is that light actually *has* a constant speed, and all the changes in length, mass, and time with motion, all the various relativistic modifications of the Newtonian universe, *really* exist. We live in an Einsteinian Universe.

The Einsteinian universe seems against common sense only because all our ordinary experience of life deals with small regions and low speeds, where the relativistic corrections are virtually zero, and Newtonian relationships are correct to a high degree of accuracy.

Well, then, we've given up the flat-Earth and accepted the spherical-Earth. Why can't we give up the Newtonian-universe and accept the Einsteinian-universe?

Because there is no easily grasped model of the Einsteinian universe. We don't have the equivalent of a painted globe over which we can trace lines.

Suppose there were no such thing as a globe and no way of conceptualizing one. Suppose we had to work with a maximum-separation as an assumption without ever explaining what this represented in the form of a spherical Earth.

In that case, people would be demanding, to this day, *why* we can't go farther than 20,000 kilometers from home and yelling about it and getting red in the face with rage at scientists obtusely clinging to the limitation.

They would say, "If you were 20,000 kilometers from home and kept on walking, you would somehow break the distance-barrier. After all, we broke the sound-barrier and we'll break the distance-barrier, too. You scientists are just stupid and dogmatic."

But they *don't* say it because we can explain the situation with a globe, and they see that the 20,000 kilometer-distance is indeed a sensible maximum.

But in relativity, we have nothing easy to conceptualize, but must start with the constancy of light-speed and deduce the consequences. And people can't accept it.

They say, "But *why* can't we go faster than light?"

And they say, "Suppose two spaceships are moving away from each other and each is going at 200,000 kilometers per second, doesn't it stand to reason that each spaceship sees the other as going faster than light?"

And they say, "We broke the sound-barriers, and we'll break the light-barrier. You scientists are just stupid and dogmatic."

And no amount of explaining ever seems to help.

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In which a voyage across the Great Sea of Majipoor turns from monotony to mystery and danger, as the crew battles against a slithering carpet of dragon-grass. Mr. Silverberg's new stories about the planet Majipoor will be collected and published in book form in 1982 under the title MAJIPOOR CHRONICLES.

In the Fifth Year of the Voyage

BY
ROBERT SILVERBERG

In the fifth year of the voyage Sinnabor Lavon noticed the first strands of dragon-grass coiling and writhing in the sea alongside the hull of the ship.

He had no idea of what it was, of course, for no one on Majipoor had ever seen dragon-grass before. This distant reach of the Great Sea had never been explored. But he did know that this was the fifth year of the voyage, for every morning Sinnabor Lavon had carefully noted the date and the ship's position in his log, so that the explorers would not lose their psychological bearings on this boundless and monotonous ocean. Thus he was certain that this day lay in the twentieth year of the Pontificate of Dizimaule, Lord Arioc being Coronal, and that this was the fifth year since the *Spurifon* had set out from the port of Tilomon on her journey around the world.

He mistook the dragon-grass for a mass of sea-serpents at first. It seemed to move with an inner force, twisting, wriggling, contracting, relaxing. Against the calm dark water it gleamed with a shimmering richness of color, each strand iridescent, showing glints of emerald and indigo and vermilion. There was a small patch of it off the port side and a broader streak of it staining the sea to starboard.

Lavon peered over the rail to the lower deck and saw a trio of shaggy four-armed figures below: Skandar crewmen, mending nets, or pretending to. They met his gaze with sour, sullen looks. Like many of the crew, they had long ago grown weary of the voyage. "You, there!" Lavon yelled. "Put out the scoop! Take some samples of those serpents!"

"Serpents, captain? What serpents you mean?"

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"There! There! Can't you see?"

The Skandars glanced at the water and then, with a certain patronizing solemnity, up at Sinnabor Lavon. "You mean that grass in the water?"

Lavon took a closer look. Grass? Already the ship was beyond the first patches, but there was more ahead, larger masses of it, and he squinted, trying to pick individual strands out of the tangled drifts. The stuff moved, as serpents might move. But yet Lavon saw no heads, no eyes. Well, possibly grass, then. He gestured impatiently, and the Skandars, in no hurry, began to extend the jointed boom-mounted scoop with which biological specimens were collected.

By the time Lavon reached the lower deck a dripping little mound of the grass was spread on the boards, and half a dozen staffers had gathered about it: First Mate Vormecht, Chief Navigator Galimoin, Joachil Noor and a couple of her scientists, and Mikdal Hasz, the chronicler. There was sharp ammoniac smell in the air. The three Skandars stood back, ostentatiously holding their noses and muttering, but the others, pointing, laughing, poking at the grass, appeared more excited and animated than they had seemed for weeks.

Lavon knelt beside them. No doubt of it, the stuff was seaweed of some sort, each flat fleshy strand about as long as a man, about as wide as a forearm, about as thick as a finger. It twitched and jerked convulsively, as though on strings, but its motions grew perceptibly slower from moment to moment as it dried, and the brilliant colors were fading quickly.

"Scoop up some more," Joachil Noor told the Skandars. "And this time, dump it in a tub of sea water to keep it alive."

The Skandars did not move. "The stench — such a filthy stench—" one of the hairy beings grunted.

Joachil Noor walked toward them — the short wiry woman looked like a child beside the gigantic creatures — and waved her hand brusquely. The Skandars, shrugging, lumbered to their task.

Sinnabor Lavon said to her, "What do you make of it?"

"Algae. Some unknown species, but everything's unknown this far out at sea. The color changes are interesting. I don't know whether they're caused by pigment fluctuations or simply result from optical tricks, the play of light over the shifting epidermal layers."

"And the movements? Algae don't have muscles."

"Plenty of plants are capable of motion. Minor oscillations of electrical current, causing variances in columns of fluid within the plant's structure — you know the sensitivos of northwestern Zimroel? You shout at them and they cringe. Sea water's an excellent conductor; these algae must pick up all sorts of electrical impulses. We'll study them carefully." Joachil Noor smiled.

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"I tell you, they come as a gift from the Divine. Another week of empty sea and I'd have jumped overboard."

Lavon nodded. He had been feeling it too: that hideous killing boredom, that frightful choking feeling of having condemned himself to an endless journey to nowhere. Even he, who had given seven years of his life to organizing this expedition, who was willing to spend all the rest of it carrying it to completion, even he, in this fifth year of the voyage, paralyzed by listlessness, numb with apathy—

"Tonight," he said, "give us a report, eh? Preliminary findings. Unique new species of seaweed."

Joachil Noor signaled and the Skandars hoisted the tub of seaweed to their broad backs and carried it off toward the laboratory. The three biologists followed.

"There'll be plenty of it for them to study," said Vormecht. The first mate pointed. "Look, there! The sea ahead is thick with it!"

"Too thick, perhaps?" Mikdal Hasz said.

Sinnabor Lavon turned to the chronicler, a dry-voiced little man with pale eyes and one shoulder higher than the other. "What do you mean?"

"I mean fouled rotors, captain. If the seaweed gets much thicker. There are tales from Old Earth that I've read, of oceans where the weeds were impenetrable, where ships became hopelessly enmeshed, their crews living on crabs and fishes and eventually dying of thirst, and the vessels drifting on and on for hundreds of years with skeletons aboard—"

Chief Navigator Galimoin snorted. "Fantasy. Fable."

"And if it happens to us?" asked Mikdal Hasz.

Vormecht said, "How likely is that?"

Lavon realized they were all looking at him. He stared at the sea. Yes, the weeds did appear thicker; beyond the bow they gathered in bunched clumps, and their rhythmic writhings made the flat and listless surface of the water seem to throb and swell. But broad channels lay between each clump. Was it possible that these weeds could engulf so capable a ship as the *Spurifon*? There was silence on the deck. It was almost comic: the dread menace of the seaweed, the tense officers divided and contentious, the captain required to make the decision that might mean life or death—

The true menace, Lavon thought, is not seaweed but boredom. For months the journey had been so uneventful that the days had become voids that had to be filled with the most desperate entertainments. Each dawn the swollen bronze-green sun of the tropics rose out of Zimroel; by noon it blazed overhead out of a cloudless sky; in the afternoon it plunged toward the inconceivably distant horizon, and the next day it was the same. There had been no rain for weeks, no changes of any kind in the weather. The Great Sea filled all

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the universe. They saw no land, not even a scrap of island this far out, no birds, no creatures of the water. In such an existence an unknown species of seaweed became a delicious novelty. A ferocious restlessness was consuming the spirits of the voyagers, these dedicated and committed explorers who once had shared Lavon's vision of an epic quest and who now were grimly and miserably enduring the torment of knowing that they had thrown away their lives in a moment of romantic folly. No one had expected it to be like this, when they had set out to make the first crossing in history of the Great Sea that occupied nearly half of their giant planet. They had imagined daily adventure, new beasts of fantastic nature, unknown islands, heroic storms, a sky riven by lightning and daubed with clouds of fifty unfamiliar hues. But not this, this grinding sameness, this unvarying repetition of days. Lavon had already begun to calculate the risks of mutiny, for it might be seven or nine or eleven more years before they made landfall on the shores of far-off Alhanroel, and he doubted that there were many on board who had the heart to see it through to the end. There must be dozens who had begun to dream dreams of turning the ship around and heading back to Zimroel; there were times when he dreamed of it himself. Therefore let us seek risks, he thought, and if need be let us manufacture them out of fantasy. Therefore let us brave the peril, real or imagined, of the seaweed. The possibility of danger will awaken us from our deadly lethargy.

"We can cope with seaweed," Lavon said. "Let's move onward."

Within an hour he was beginning to have doubts. From his pacing-place on the bridge he stared warily at the ever-thickening seaweed. It was forming little islands now, fifty or a hundred yards across, and the channels between were narrower. All the surface of the sea was in motion, quivering, trembling. Under the searing rays of an almost vertical sun the seaweed grew richer in color, sliding in a manic way from tone to tone as if pumped higher by the inrush of solar energy. He saw creatures moving about in the tight-packed strands: enormous crab-like things, many-legged, spherical, with knobby green shells, and sinuous serpentine animals something like squid, harvesting other life-forms too small for Lavon to see.

Vormecht said nervously, "Perhaps a change of course—"

"Perhaps," Lavon said. "I'll send a lookout up to tell us how far this mess extends."

Changing course, even by a few degrees, held no appeal for him. His course was set; his mind was fixed; he feared that any deviation would shatter his increasingly frail resolve. And yet he was no monomaniac, pressing ahead without regard to risk. It was only that he saw how easy it would be for the people of the *Spurifon* to lose

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what was left of their dedication to the immense enterprise on which they had embarked.

This was a golden age for Majipoor, a time of heroic figures and mighty deeds. Explorers were going everywhere, into the desert barrens of Suvrael and the forests and marshes of Zimroel and the virgin outlands of Alhanroel, and into the archipelagos and island clusters that bordered the three continents. The population was expanding rapidly; towns were turning into cities and cities into improbably great metropolises; nonhuman settlers were pouring in from the neighboring worlds to seek their fortunes; everything was excitement, change, growth. And Sinnabor Lavon had chosen for himself the craziest feat of all, to cross the Great Sea by ship. No one had ever attempted that. From space one could see that the giant planet was half water, that the continents, huge though they were, were cramped together in a single hemisphere and all the other face of the world was a blankness of ocean. And though it was some thousands of years since the human colonization of Majipoor had begun, there had been work aplenty to do on land, and the Great Sea had been left to itself and to the armadas of sea-dragons that untiringly crossed it from west to east in migrations lasting decades.

But Lavon was in love with Majipoor and yearned to embrace it all. He had traversed it from Amblemorn at the foot of Castle Mount to Til-omon on the other shore of the Great Sea; and now, driven by the need to close the circle, he had poured all his resources and energies into outfitting this awesome vessel, as self-contained and self-sufficient as an island, aboard which he and a crew as crazy as himself intended to spend a decade or more exploring that unknown ocean. He knew, and probably they knew too, that they had sent themselves off on what might be an impossible task. But if they succeeded and brought their argosy safely into harbor on Alhanroel's eastern coast where no ocean-faring ship had ever landed, their names would live forever.

"Hoy!" cried the lookout suddenly. "Dragons ho! Hoy! Hoy!"

"Weeks of boredom," Vormecht muttered, "and then everything at once!"

Lavon saw the lookout, dark against the dazzling sky, pointing rigidly north-northwest. He shaded his eyes and followed the outstretched arm. Yes! Great humped shapes, gliding serenely toward them, flukes high, wings held close to their bodies or in a few cases magnificently outspread—

"Dragons!" Galimoin called. "Dragons, look!" shouted a dozen other voices at once.

The *Spurifon* had encountered two herds of sea-dragons earlier in the voyage: six months out, among the islands that they had named the Stiamot Archipelago; and then two years

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after that, in the part of the ocean that they had dubbed the Arioc Deep. Both times the herds had been large ones, hundreds of the huge creatures, with many pregnant cows, and they had stayed far away from the *Spurifon*. But these appeared to be only the outliers of their herd, no more than fifteen or twenty of them, a handful of giant males and the others adolescents hardly forty feet in length. The writhing seaweed now seemed inconsequential as the dragons neared. Everyone seemed to be on deck at once, almost dancing with excitement.

Lavon gripped the rail tightly. He had wanted risk for the sake of diversion: well, here was risk. An angry adult sea-dragon could cripple a ship, even one so well defended as the *Spurifon*, with a few mighty blows. Only rarely did they attack vessels that had not attacked them first, but it had been known to happen. Did these creatures imagine that the *Spurifon* was a dragon-hunting ship? Each year a new herd of sea-dragons passed through the waters between Piliplok and the Isle of Sleep, where hunting them was permitted, and fleets of dragon-ships greatly thinned their numbers then; these big ones, at least, must be survivors of that gamut, and who knew what resentments they harbored? The *Spurifon's* harpooners moved into readiness at a signal from Lavon.

But no attack came. The dragons seemed to regard the ship as a curiosity, nothing more. They had come here to feed. When they reached the first clumps of seaweed, they opened their immense mouths and began to gulp the stuff down by the bale, sucking in along with it the squid-things and the crab-things and all the rest. For several hours they grazed noisily amid the seaweed; and then as if by common agreement, they slipped below the surface and within minutes were gone.

A great ring of open sea now surrounded the *Spurifon*.

"They must have eaten tons of it," Lavon murmured. "Tons!"

"And now our way is clear," said Galimoin.

Vormecht shook his head. "No. See, captain? The dragon-grass, farther out. Thicker and thicker and thicker!"

Lavon stared into the distance. Wherever he looked, there was a thin dark line along the horizon.

"Land," Galimoin suggested. "Islands — atolls—"

"On every side of us?" Vormecht said scornfully. "No, Galimoin. We've sailed into the middle of a continent of this dragon-grass stuff. The opening that the dragons ate for us is just a delusion. We're trapped!"

"It's only seaweed," Galimoin said. "If we have to, we'll cut our way through it."

Lavon eyed the horizon uneasily. He was beginning to share Vormecht's discomfort. A few hours ago the dragon-grass had amounted to mere isolated strands, then scattered patches

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and clumps; but now, although the ship was for the moment in clear water, it did indeed look as if an unbroken ring of the seaweed had come to enclose them fore and aft. And yet could it possibly become thick enough to block their passage?

Twilight was descending. The warm heavy air grew pink, then quickly gray. Darkness rushed down upon the voyagers out of the eastern sky.

"We'll send out boats in the morning and see what there is to see," Lavon announced.

That evening after dinner Joachil Noor reported on the dragon-grass: a giant alga, she said, with an intricate biochemistry, well worth detailed investigation. She spoke at length about its complex system of color-nodes, its powerful contractile capacity. Everyone on board, even some who had been lost in fogs of hopeless depression for weeks, crowded around to peer at the specimens in the tub, to touch them, to speculate and comment. Sinnabor Lavon rejoiced to see such liveliness aboard the *Spurifon* once again after these weeks of doldrums.

He dreamed that night that he was dancing on the water, performing a vigorous solo in some high-spirited ballet. The dragon-grass was firm and resilient beneath his flashing feet.

An hour before dawn he was awakened by urgent knocking at his cabin door. A Skandar was there — Skeen, standing third watch. "Come quickly — the dragon-grass, captain—"

The extent of the disaster was evident even by the faint pearly gleams of the new day. All night the *Spurifon* had been on the move, and the dragon-grass had been on the move, and now the ship lay in the heart of a tight-woven fabric of seaweed that seemed to stretch to the ends of the universe. The landscape that presented itself as the first green streaks of morning tinted the sky was like something out of a dream: a single unbroken carpet of a trillion trillion knotted strands, its surface pulsing, twitching, throbbing, trembling, and its colors shifting everywhere through a restless spectrum of deep assertive tones. Here and there in this infinitely entangled webwork its inhabitants could be seen variously scuttling, creeping, slithering, crawling, clambering, and scampering. From the densely entwined masses of seaweed rose an odor so piercing it seemed to go straight past the nostrils to the back of the skull. No clear water was in sight. The *Spurifon* was becalmed, stalled, as motionless as if in the night she had sailed a thousand miles overland into the heart of the Suvrael desert.

Lavon looked toward Vormecht — the first mate, so querulous and edgy all yesterday, now bore a calm look of vindication — and toward Chief Navigator Galimoin, whose boisterous con-

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fidence had given way to a tense and volatile frame of mind, obvious from his fixed, rigid stare and the grim clamping of his lips.

"I've shut the engines down," Vormecht said. "We were sucking in dragon-grass by the barrel. The rotors were clogged almost at once."

"Can they be cleared?" Lavon asked.

"We're clearing them," said Vormecht. "But the moment we start up again, we'll be eating seaweed through every intake."

Scowling, Lavon looked to Galimoin and said, "Have you been able to measure the area of the seaweed mass?"

"We can't see beyond it, captain."

"And have you sounded its depth?"

"It's like a lawn. We can't push our plumbs through it."

Lavon let his breath out slowly. "Get boats out right away. We need to survey what we're up against. Vormecht, send two divers down to find out how deep the seaweed goes and whether there's some way we can screen our intakes against it. And ask Joachil Noor to come here."

The little biologist appeared promptly, looking weary but perversely cheerful. Before Lavon could speak, she said, "I've been up all night studying the algae. They're metal-fixers, with a heavy concentration of rhenium and vanadium in their—"

"Have you noticed that we're stopped?"

She seemed indifferent to that. "So I see."

"We find ourselves living out an ancient fable, in which ships are caught by impenetrable weeds and become derelicts. We may be here a long while."

"It will give us a chance to study this unique ecological province, captain."

"The rest of our lives, perhaps."

"Do you think so?" asked Joachil Noor, startled at last.

"I have no idea. But I want you to shift the aim of your studies, for the time being. Find out what kills these weeds, aside from exposure to the air. We may have to wage biological warfare against them if we're ever going to get out of here. I want some chemical, some method, some scheme, that'll clear them away from our rotors."

"Trap a pair of sea-dragons," Joachil Noor said at once, "and chain one to each side of the bow, and let them eat us free."

Sinnabor Lavon did not smile. "Think about it more seriously," he said, "and report to me later."

He watched as two boats were lowered, each bearing a crew of four. Lavon hoped that the outboard motors would be able to keep clear of the dragon-grass, but there was no chance of that: almost immediately the blades were snarled, and it became necessary for the boatmen to unship the oars and beat a slow, grueling course through the weeds, while pausing occasionally

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to drive off with clubs the fearless giant crustaceans that wandered over the face of the choked sea. In fifteen minutes the boats were no more than a hundred yards from the ship. Meanwhile a pair of divers clad in breathing-masks had gone down, one Hjort, one human, hacking openings in the dragon-grass alongside the ship and vanishing into the clotted depths. When they failed to return after half an hour, Lavon said to the first mate, "Vormecht, how long can men stay underwater wearing those masks?"

"About this long, captain. Perhaps a little longer for a Hjort, but not much."

"So I thought."

"We can hardly send more divers after them, can we?"

"Hardly," said Lavon bleakly. "Do you imagine the submersible would be able to penetrate the weeds?"

"Probably not."

"I doubt it too. But we'll have to try it. Call for volunteers."

The *Spurifon* carried a small underwater vessel that it employed in its scientific research. It had not been used in months, and by the time it could be readied for descent more than an hour had passed; the fate of the two divers was certain, and Lavon felt the awareness of their deaths settling about his spirit like a skin of cold metal. He had never known anyone to die except from extreme old age, and the strangeness of accidental mortality was a hard thing for him to comprehend, nearly as hard as the knowledge that he was responsible for what had happened.

Three volunteers climbed into the submersible and it was winched overside. It rested a moment on the surface of the water; then its operators thrust out the retractible claws with which it was equipped, and like some fat glossy crab it began to dig its way under. It was a slow business, for the dragon-grass clung close to it, reweaving its sundered web almost as fast as the claws could rip it apart. But gradually the little vessel slid deeper and slipped from sight.

Galimoin was shouting something over a bullhorn from another deck. Lavon looked up and saw the two boats he had sent out, struggling through the weeds perhaps half a mile away. But now it was midmorning, and in the glare it was hard to tell which way they were headed, but it seemed they were returning.

Alone and silent, Lavon waited on the bridge. No one dared approach him. He stared down at the floating carpet of dragon-grass, heaving here and there with strange and terrible lifeforms, and thought of the two drowned men and the others in the submersible and the ones in the boats and of those still safe aboard the *Spurifon*, all enmeshed in the same grotesque plight. How easy it would have been to avoid this, he thought, and how easy to think such thoughts. And how futile.

He held his post, motionless, well past noon, in the silence and the haze

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and the heat and the stench. Then he went to his cabin. Later in the day Vormecht came to him with the news that the crew of the submersible had found the divers hanging near the stilled rotors, shrouded in tight windings of dragon-grass, as though the weeds had deliberately set upon and engulfed them. Lavon was skeptical of that; they must merely have become tangled in it, he insisted, but without conviction. The submersible itself had had a hard time of it and had nearly burned out its engines in the effort to sink fifty feet. The weeds, Vormecht said, formed a virtually solid layer for a dozen feet below the surface. "What about the boats?" Lavon asked, and the first mate told him that they had returned safely, their crews exhausted by the work of rowing through the knotted weeds. In the entire morning they had managed to get no more than a mile from the ship, and they had seen no end to the dragon-grass, not even an opening in its unbroken weave. One of the boatmen had been attacked by a crab-creature on the way back but had escaped with only minor cuts.

During the day there was no change in the situation. No change seemed possible. The dragon-grass had seized the *Spurifon*, and there was no reason for it to release the ship, unless the voyagers compelled it to, which Lavon did not at present see how to accomplish.

He asked the chronicler Mikdal Hasz to go among the people of the *Spurifon* and ascertain their mood. "Mainly calm," Hasz reported. "Some are troubled. Most find our predicament strangely refreshing: a challenge, a deviation from the monotony of recent months."

"And you?"

"I have my fears, captain. But I want to believe we will find a way out. And I respond to the beauty of this weird landscape with unexpected pleasure."

Beauty? Lavon had not thought to see beauty in it. Darkly he stared at the miles of dragon-grass, bronze-red under the bloody sunset sky. A red mist was rising from the water, and in that thick vapor the creatures of the algae were moving about in great numbers, so that the enormous raft-like weed-structures were constantly in tremor. Beauty? A sort of beauty indeed, Lavon conceded. He felt as if the *Spurifon* had become stranded in the midst of some huge painting, a vast scroll of soft fluid shapes, depicting a dreamlike disorienting world without landmarks, on whose liquid surface there was unending change of pattern and color. So long as he could keep himself from regarding the dragon-grass as the enemy and destroyer of all he had worked to achieve, he could to some degree admire the shifting glints and forms all about him.

He lay awake much of the night searching without success for a tactic to use against this vegetable adversary.

Morning brought new colors in the

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weed, pale greens and streaky yellows under a discouraging sky burdened with thin clouds. Five or six colossal sea-dragons were visible a long way off, slowly eating a path for themselves through the water. How convenient it would be, Lavon reflected, if the *Spurifon* could do as much!

He met with his officers. They too had noticed last night's mood of general tranquillity, even fascination. But they detected tensions beginning to rise this morning. "They were already frustrated and homesick," said Vormecht, "and now they see a new delay here of days or even weeks."

"Or months or years or forever," snapped Galimoin. "What makes you think we'll ever get out?"

The navigator's voice was ragged with strain and cords stood out along the sides of his thick neck. Lavon had long ago sensed an instability somewhere within Galimoin, but even so he was not prepared for the swiftness with which Galimoin had been undone by the onset of the dragon-grass.

Vormecht seemed amazed by it also. The first mate said in surprise, "You told us yourself the day before yesterday, 'It's only seaweed. We'll cut our way through it.' Remember?"

"I didn't know then what we were up against," Galimoin growled.

Lavon looked toward Joachil Noor. "What about the possibility that this stuff is migratory, that the whole formation will sooner or later break up and let us go?"

The biologist shook her head. "It could happen. But I see no reason to count on it. More likely this is a quasi-permanent ecosystem. Currents might carry it to other parts of the Great Sea, but in that case they'd carry us right along with it."

"You see?" Galimoin said glumly. "Hopeless!"

"Not yet," said Lavon. "Vormecht, what can we do about using the submersible to mount screens over the intakes?"

"Possibly. Possibly."

"Try it. Get the fabricators going on some sort of screens right away. Joachill Noor, what are your thoughts on a chemical counterattack against the seaweed?"

"We're running tests," she said. "I can't promise anything."

No one could promise anything. They could only think and work and wait and hope.

Designing screens for the intakes took a couple of days; building them took five more. Meanwhile Joachil Noor experimented with methods of killing the grass around the ship, without apparent result.

In those days not only the *Spurifon* but time itself seemed to stand still. Daily, Lavon took his sightings and made his long entries; the ship was actually traveling a few miles a day, moving steadily south-southwest, but it was going nowhere in relation to the entire mass of algae: to provide a reference point they marked the dragon-

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grass around the ship with dyes, and there was no movement in the great yellow and scarlet stains as the days went by. And in this ocean they could drift forever with the currents and not come within reach of land.

Lavon felt himself fraying. He had difficulty maintaining his usual upright posture; his shoulders now were beginning to curve, his head felt like a dead weight. He felt older; he felt old. Guilt was eroding him. On him was the responsibility for having failed to pull away from the dragon-grass zone the moment the danger was apparent; only a few hours would have made the difference, he told himself, but he had let himself be diverted by the spectacle of the sea-dragons and by his idiotic theory that a bit of peril would add spice to what had become a lethally bland voyage. For that he assailed himself mercilessly, and it was not far from there to blaming himself for having led these unwitting people into this entire absurd and futile journey. A voyage lasting ten or fifteen years, from nowhere to nowhere? Why? Why?

Yet he worked at maintaining morale among the others. The ration of wine — limited, for the ship's cellars had to last out the voyage — was doubled. There were nightly entertainments. Lavon ordered every research group to bring its oceanographic studies up to date, thinking that this was no moment for idleness on anyone's part. Papers that should have been written months or even years before, but which had been put aside in the long slow progress of the cruise, now were to be completed at once. Work was the best medicine for boredom, frustration, and — a new and growing factor — fear.

When the first screens were ready, a volunteer crew went down in the submersible to attempt to weld them to the hull over the intakes. The job, a tricky one at best, was made more complicated by the need to do it entirely with the little vessel's extensor claws. After the loss of the two divers Lavon would not risk letting anyone enter the water except in the submersible. Under the direction of a skilled mechanic named Duroin Klays the work proceeded day after day, but it was a thankless business. The heavy masses of dragon-grass, nudging the hull with every swell of the sea, frequently ripped the fragile mountings loose, and the welders made little progress.

On the sixth day of the work Duroin Klays came to Lavon with a sheaf of glossy photographs. They showed patterns of orange splotches against a dull gray background.

"Hull corrosion, sir. I noticed it yesterday and took a series of underwater shots this morning."

"Hull corrosion?" Lavon forced a smile. "That's hardly possible. The hull's completely resistant. What you're showing me here must be barnacles or sponges of some sort, or—"

"No, sir. Perhaps it's not clear from

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the pictures," said Duroin Klays. "But you can tell very easily when you're down in the submersible. It's like little scars, eaten into the metal. I'm quite sure of it, sir."

Lavon dismissed the mechanic and sent for Joachil Noor. She studied the photographs a long while and said finally, "It's altogether likely."

"That the dragon-grass is eating into the hull?"

"We've suspected the possibility of it for a few days. One of our first findings was a sharp pH gradient between this part of the ocean and the open sea. We're sitting in an acid bath, captain, and I'm sure it's the algae that are secreting the acids. And we know that they're metal-fixers whose tissues are loaded with heavy elements. Normally they pull their metals from sea water, of course. But they must regard the *Spurifon* as a gigantic banquet table. I wouldn't be surprised to find that the reason the dragon-grass became so thick so suddenly in our vicinity is that the algae have been flocking from miles around to get in on the feast."

"If that's the case, then it's foolish to expect the algae jam to break up of its own accord."

"Indeed."

Lavon blinked. "And if we remain locked in it long enough, the dragon-grass will eat holes right through us?"

The biologist laughed and said, "That might take hundreds of years. Starvation's a more immediate problem."

"How so?"

"How long can we last eating nothing but what's currently in storage on board?"

"A few months, I suppose. You know we depend on what we can catch as we go along. Are you saying—"

"Yes, captain. Everything in the ecosystem around us right now is probably poisonous to us. The algae absorb oceanic metals. The small crustaceans and fishes eat the algae. The bigger creatures eat the smaller ones. The concentration of metallic salts gets stronger and stronger as we go up the chain. And we—"

"Won't thrive on a diet of rhenium and vanadium."

"And molybdenum and rhodium. No, captain. Have you seen the latest medical reports? An epidemic of nausea, fever, some circulatory problems — how have *you* been feeling, captain? And it's only the beginning. None of us yet has a serious buildup. But in another week, two weeks, three—"

"May the Lady protect us!" Lavon gasped.

"The Lady's blessings don't reach this far west," said Joachil Noor. She smiled coolly. "I recommend that we discontinue all fishing at once and draw on our stores until we're out of this part of the sea. And that we finish the job of screening the rotors as fast as possible."

"Agreed," said Lavon.

When she had left him he stepped

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to the bridge and looked gloomily out over the congested, quivering water. The colors today were richer than ever, heavy umbers, sepias, russets, indigos. The dragon-grass was thriving. Lavon imagined the fleshy strands slapping up against the hull, searing the gleaming metal with acid secretions, burning it away molecule by molecule, converting the ship to ion soup and greedily drinking it. He shivered. He could no longer see beauty in the intricate textures of the seaweed. That dense and tightly interwoven mass of algae stretching toward the horizon now meant only stink and decay to him, danger and death, the bubbling gases of rot and the secret teeth of destruction. Hour by hour the flanks of the great ship grew thinner, and here she still sat, immobilized, helpless, in the midst of the foe that consumed her.

Lavon tried to keep these new perils from becoming general knowledge. That was impossible, of course: there could be no secrets for long in a closed universe like the *Spurifon*. His insistence on secrecy did at least serve to minimize open discussion of the problems, which could lead so swiftly to panic. Everyone knew, but everyone pretended that he alone realized how bad things were.

Nevertheless the pressure mounted. Tempers were short; conversations were strained; hands shook, words were slurred, things were dropped. Lavon remained apart from the others as much as his duties would allow. He prayed for deliverance and sought guidance in dreams, but Joachil Noor seemed to be right: the voyagers were beyond the reach of the loving Lady of the Isle whose counsel brought comfort to the suffering and wisdom to the troubled.

The only new glimmer of hope came from the biologists. Joachil Noor suggested that it might be possible to disrupt the electrical systems of the dragon-grass by conducting a current through the water. It sounded doubtful to Lavon, but he authorized her to put some of the ship's technicians to work on it.

And finally the last of the intake screens was in place. It was late in the third week of their captivity.

"Start the rotors," Lavon ordered.

The ship throbbed with renewed life as the rotors began to move. On the bridge the officers stood frozen: Lavon, Vormecht, Galimoin, silent, still, barely breathing. Tiny wavelets formed along the bow. The *Spurifon* was beginning to move! Slowly, stubbornly, the ship began to cut a path through the close-packed masses of writhing dragon-grass—

—and shuddered, and bucked, and fought, and the throb of the rotors ceased—

"The screens aren't holding!" Galimoin cried in anguish.

"Find out what's happening," La-

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von told Vormecht. He turned to Galimoin, who was standing as though his feet had been nailed to the deck, trembling, sweating, muscles rippling weirdly about his lips and cheeks. Lavon said gently, "It's probably only a minor hitch. Come, let's have some wine, and in a moment we'll be moving again."

"No!" Galimoin bellowed. "I felt the screens rip loose. The dragon-grass is eating them."

More urgently Lavon said, "The screens will hold. By this time tomorrow we'll be far from here, and you'll have us on course again for Alhanroel—"

"We're lost!" Galimoin shouted, and broke away suddenly, arms flailing as he ran down the steps and out of sight. Lavon hesitated. Vormecht returned, looking grim: the screens had indeed broken free, the rotors were fouled, the ship had halted again. Lavon swayed. He felt infected by Galimoin's despair. His life's dream was ending in failure, an absurd catastrophe, a mocking farce.

Joachil Noor appeared. "Captain, do you know that Galimoin's gone berserk? He's up on the observation deck, wailing and screaming and dancing and calling for a mutiny."

"I'll go to him," said Lavon.

"I felt the rotors start. But then—"

Lavon nodded. "Fouled again. The screens ripped loose." As he moved toward the catwalk he heard Joachil Noor say something about her electrical project, that she was ready to make the first full-scale test, and he replied that she should begin at once, and report to him as soon as there were any encouraging results. But her words went quickly out of his mind. The problem of Galimoin occupied him entirely.

The chief navigator had taken up a position on the high platform to starboard where once he had made his observations and calculations of latitudes and longitudes. Now he capered like a deranged beast, strutting back and forth, flinging out his arms, shouting incoherently, singing raucous snatches of balladry, denouncing Lavon as a fool who had deliberately led them into this trap. A dozen or so members of the crew were gathered below, listening, some jeering, some calling out their agreement, and others were arriving quickly: this was the sport of the moment, the day's divertissement. To Lavon's horror he saw Mikdal Hasz making his way out onto Galimoin's platform from the far side. Hasz was speaking in low tones, beckoning to the navigator, quietly urging him to come down; and several times Galimoin broke off his harangue to look toward Hasz and growl a threat at him. But Hasz kept advancing. Now he was just a yard or two from Galimoin, still speaking, smiling, holding out his open hands as if to show that he carried no weapons.

"Get away!" Galimoin roared. "Keep back!"

Lavon, edging toward the platform

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himself, signaled to Hasz to keep out of reach. Too late: in a single frenzied moment the infuriated Galimoin lunged at Hasz, scooped the little man up as if he were a doll, and hurled him over the railing into the sea. A cry of astonishment went up from the onlookers. Lavon rushed to the railing in time to see Hasz, limbs flailing, crash against the surface of the water. Instantly there was convulsive activity in the dragon-grass. Like maddened eels the strands swarmed and twisted and writhed; the sea seemed to boil for a moment, and then Hasz was lost to view.

A terrifying dizziness swept through Lavon. He felt as though his heart filled his entire chest, crushing his lungs, and his brain was spinning in his skull. He had never seen violence before. He had never heard of an instance in his lifetime of the deliberate slaying of one human by another. That it should have happened on his ship, by one of his officers upon another, in the midst of this crisis, was intolerable, a mortal wound. He moved forward like one who walks while dreaming and laid his hands on Galimoin's powerful, muscular shoulders, and with a strength he had never had before he shoved the navigator over the rail, easily, unthinkingly. He heard a strangled wail, a splash; he looked down, amazed, appalled, and saw the sea boiling a second time as the dragon-grass closed over Galimoin's thrashing body.

Slowly, numbly, Lavon descended from the platform.

He felt dazed and flushed. Something seemed broken within him. A ring of blurred figures surrounded him. Gradually he discerned eyes, mouths, the patterns of familiar faces. He started to say something, but no words would come, only sounds. He toppled and was caught and eased to the deck. Someone's arm was around his shoulders; someone was giving him wine. "Look at his eyes," he heard a voice say. "He's gone into shock!" Lavon began to shiver. Somehow — he was unaware of being lifted — he found himself in his cabin, Vormecht bending over him and others standing behind.

The first mate said quietly, "The ship is moving, captain."

"What? What? Hasz is dead. Galimoin killed Hasz and I killed Galimoin."

"It was the only possible thing to do. The man was insane."

"I *killed* him, Vormecht."

"We couldn't have kept a madman locked up on board for the next ten years. He was dangerous to us all. His life was forfeit. You had the power. You acted rightly."

"We do not kill," Lavon said. "Our barbarian ancestors took each other's lives, on Old Earth long ago, but we do not kill. *I* do not kill. We were beasts once, but that was in another era, on a different planet. I killed him, Vormecht."

"You are the captain. You had the right. He threatened the success of the voyage."

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"Success? Success?"

"The ship is moving again, captain."

Lavon stared, but could barely see. "What are you saying?"

"Come. Look."

Four massive arms enfolded him, and Lavon smelled the musky tang of Skandar fur. The giant crewman lifted him and carried him to the deck and put him carefully down. Lavon tottered, but Vormecht was at his side, and Joachil Noor. The first mate pointed toward the sea. A zone of open water bordered the *Spurifon* along the entire length of her hull.

Joachil Noor said, "We dropped cables into the water and gave the dragon-grass a good jolt of current. It shorted out their contractile systems. The ones closest to us died instantly and the rest began to pull back. There's a clear channel in front of us as far as we can see."

"The voyage is saved," said Vormecht. "We can go onward now!"

"No," Lavon said. He felt the haze and confusion lifting from his mind. "Who's navigator now? Have him turn the ship back toward Zimroel."

"But—"

"Turn her around! Back to Zimroel!"

They were gaping at him, bewildered, stunned. "Captain, you're not yourself yet. To give such an order in the very moment when all is well again — you need to rest, and in a few hours you'll feel—"

"The voyage is ended, Vormecht. We're going back."

"No!"

"No? Is this a mutiny, then?" Their eyes were blank. Their faces were expressionless. Lavon said, "Do you really want to continue? Aboard a doomed ship with a murderer for a captain? You were all sick of the voyage before any of this happened. Don't you think I knew that? You were hungry for home. You didn't dare say it, is all. Well, now I feel as you do."

Vormecht said, "We've been at sea five years. We may be halfway across. It might take us no longer to reach the farther shore than to return."

"Or it might take us forever," said Lavon. "It does not matter. I have no heart for going forward."

"Tomorrow you may think differently, captain."

"Tomorrow I will still have blood on my hands, Vormecht. I was not meant to bring this ship safely across the Great Sea. We bought our freedom at the cost of four lives, but the voyage was broken by it."

"Captain—"

"Turn the ship around," said Lavon.

When they came to him the next day, pleading to be allowed to continue the voyage, arguing that eternal fame and immortality awaited them on the shores of Alhanroel, Lavon calmly and quietly refused to discuss it with them. To continue now, he told them

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again, was impossible. So they looked at one another, those who had hated the voyage and yearned to be free of it and who in the euphoric moment of victory over the dragon-grass had changed their minds, and they changed their minds again, for without the driving force of Lavon's will there was no way of going on. They set their course to the east and said no more about the crossing of the Great Sea. A year afterward they were assailed by storms and severely thrown about, and in the following year there was a bad encounter with sea-dragons that severly damaged the ship's stern; but yet they continued, and of the hundred and sixty-three voyagers who had left Til-omon long before, more than a hundred were still alive, Captain Lavon among them, when the *Spurifon* came limping back into her home port in the eleventh year of the voyage.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 28

In the August issue, we asked competitors to write a science fiction recipe. Some very inventive responses, though not as many as usual (sf readers don't cook?). Anyhow, too many cooks spoil the comp, and nothing came close to a repeat this time.

FIRST PRIZE

PIT COOKED SANDWORM
(Dedicated to F. Herbert)

1 Mature Sandworm (Arrakis)
150 Kyrilean Trees (Kyril)
710 Bushels of Razor Grass (Pyrrus)
1,000 Triffid Plants (Terra)
1 Clove of Garlic (Transylvania, Terra)
23 Kilograms of Salt (Ashkelon)
180 Dozen Moneline Rosebuds (Big Planet)

Dig pit approximately 200 meters in length, 30 meters deep and 25 meters wide. Distribute throughout the pit 150 Kyrilean trees from seedlings taken from the "Tree of Life." To set trees on fire use Polax Blaster Cannon (Model AG-450) set at low beam until the wood begins to glow evenly. Add 350 bushels of razor grass. When smoke turns blue place the sandworm over the fire with tractor beam.

Use beam to rotate sandworm until carcass bright red (do not overcook). Every hour add approximately 20 bushels of razor grass to maintain smoke texture. Baste periodically with Triffid sauce.

To make Triffid sauce, harvest 1,000 young Triffid plants (just before they start walking). Squeeze plants through Mestic Strainer. Place juice in 16,000 liter container. Heat juice at a low flame for 45 minutes (Terra Time Index). Add 1 garlic clove and 23 kilograms of salt. Blend in 180 dozen Moneline rosebuds (remove thorns before adding to sauce). Bring mixture to a boil. Let simmer for 2 hours until the sauce begins to coagulate.

When sandworm is cooked, slice into 10 centimeter cubes and serve with remaining Triffid sauce on the side.

Makes 300,000 adult servings.

—Nicholas Ordway
Arlington, Texas

SECOND PRIZE

ELECTRIC SHEEP STEW
(Dedicated to Pk Dick)

2 lb. middle neck of electric sheep
4 oz. diced indefatigable frog meat
1 large onion
1 Handful of Darkness
2 oz. Horselover Fat
½ tsp. Thyme (Out of Joint)
½ tsp. Mixed Herbs
¾ pint water
¼ pint tears of a policeman
¼ tsp. Chew-Z

Cut the mutton into neat serving pieces. Peel and slice the onion and grind the darkness to a powder with a Vulcan's Hammer. Melt the Fat in a large healed ceramic stewpan and add the darkness, onion and Frog meat. Cover the pan and stand over a ring on power 1 and set the counter clock to 10 minutes. Uncover after this time and add the remaining ingredients. Bring to boil on power 2 and then lower to power 1,

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simmering. Set the counter clock for 2 hours. If the meal is not required immediately, it can be kept on a preserving machine for up to 3 days.

—Chris Chapman
Leicester, England

RUNNERS UP

LORD VALENTINE'S CASSEROLE

2 lbs. fillet of sea-dragon
1 cup fireshower wine
¾ lb. blave's cheese
1 tsp. salt
½ lb. dried dwikka fruit
¾ cup dry bread crumbs
1 spinner-bird egg
1½ tbsp. ground thokka seeds
2 tbsp. melted butter

Break the fillet of sea-dragon into chunks in a bowl. Combine with fireshower wine, crumbled or grated blave's cheese, salt, dried dwikka fruit, ½ cup dry bread crumbs, and beaten egg. Place in a greased casserole dish and sprinkle with ground thokka seeds and ¼ cup bread cumbs which have been tossed in melted butter. Bake for half an hour at moderate heat (350 deg. F).

Serves four humans, two Skandars, or 8-10 Vroons.

—John Cuthbertson
Liberty, MO

AWARD WINNING PUNCH

1 CASE OF CONSCIENCE (12 year old, bottled in bond)
1 bottle EASTERWINE
2 bottles DANDELION WINE
½ bottle STRANGE WINE (VINTAGE SEASON preferred if available)
¼ liter ICHWAN BEDWINE (to taste)
2 liters sparkling water from THE WELL OF SHIUAN
2 liters water from EUREMA'S DAM
1 CLOCKWORK ORANGE, sliced thin

Mix all liquid ingredients IN THE BOWL of BLACK GLASS. Chill with large block of ICE 9. Float slices of CLOCKWORK ORANGE on punch to garnish.

Serving suggestions:

Serve at all Hugo and Nebula Award Ceremonies. As added interest, have punch ladled out by Mike Callahan.

Warning:

Imbibing too much AWARD WINNING PUNCH may give you INFINITE DREAMS.

Additional serving hints:

A thermos jug of the punch goes well on A ROADSIDE PICNIC. It is also a thirst quencher for anyone planning to travel 'el cheapo' using THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY.

—Rachel Cosgrove Payes
and Robert Payes
Shub Oak, N.Y.

ZITIDAR SOUP
(For Mr. Burroughs)

This Barsoomian delight does especially well on those cold Okarian mornings in the frozen north, though the inhabitants of other portions of the Red Planet also enjoy a steaming bowl now and then.

1½ lbs. fresh zitidar meat for stew
1 soup bone (that of an orluk works quite well)
1½ to 2 tsp. salt
½ tsp. pepper
2 seasoned leaves from a plant man*

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1 cup ochre sea bottom (diced neatly with short-sword)
1 can Toonolian style tomatoes
1 tbsp. Warhoon sauce
1 zitidar boullion cube
Pinch of oregano (or other ERB desired)

Put meat and soup bone into the carefully cleaned bladder of a thoat, along with 4 cups water, salt, pepper and plant man leaves. Tie shut with leather thong and bring contents to rapid boil over a radium stove. Reduce heat, open, add diced ochre sea bottom and let simmer for 1 zode.

Remove bone and leaves. Cut meat into bite-size pieces and return to soup. Mix in Toonolian tomatoes, Warhoon sauce, boullion cube and preferred ERBs.

6 servings

*As plant men dislike donating their leaves for soup seasoning, it is inevitable that you will find it necessary to obtain them forcefully. Take a green man with you down the River Iss. At its end you will find the Valley Dor, which is loaded with plant men — send your share to the white apes!

—Jeff Long
Franksville, WI.

COMPETITION 29 (suggested by Paula I. Carson)

Send us up to a dozen Burma Shave roadside advertisements adapted for the space traveler of the future, e.g.:

SPACERS CONSERVE	BY UNSHAVEN FACE	THEY WAIT FOR	SHORE LEAVE THEN SHAVE	EVERYPLACE!	BURMA SHAVE!
YOU TRAVEL NEAR	YOU TRAVEL FAR	LAST CHANCE REFUEL	IS THE	NEXT STAR	

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by December 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 29 will appear in the April Issue.

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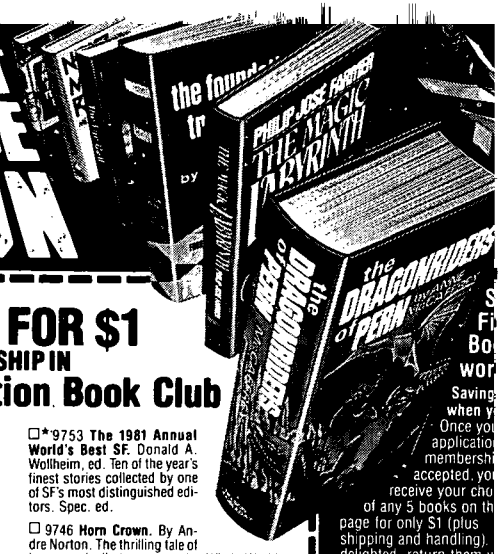

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